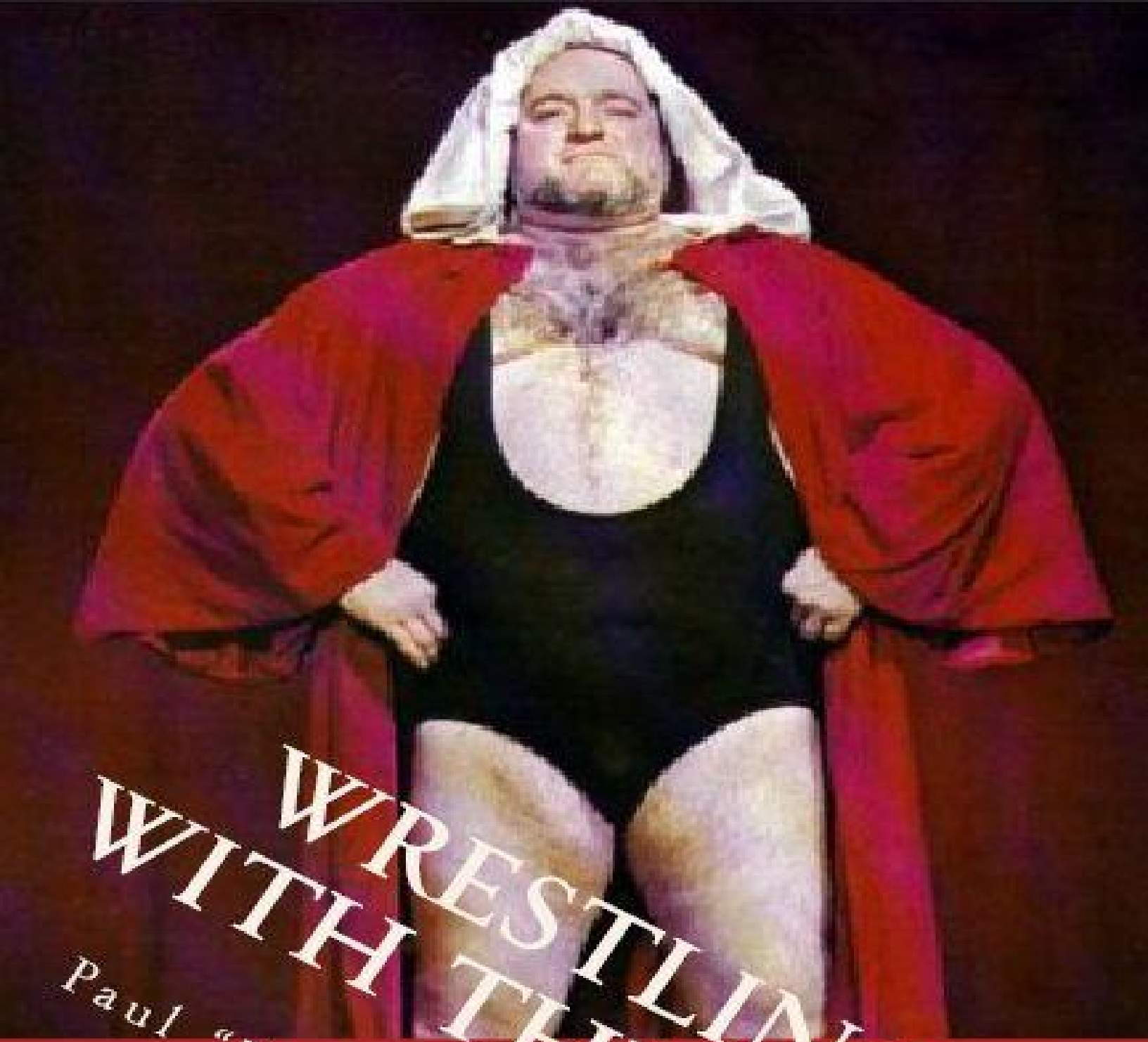

WRESTLING WITH THE PAST

Paul "The Butcher" Vachon

Paul Vachon Wrestling with the Past Life in and Out of the Ring

Paul “The Butcher” Vachon For the When Wrestling was Real trilogy, go to www.butchervachon.com

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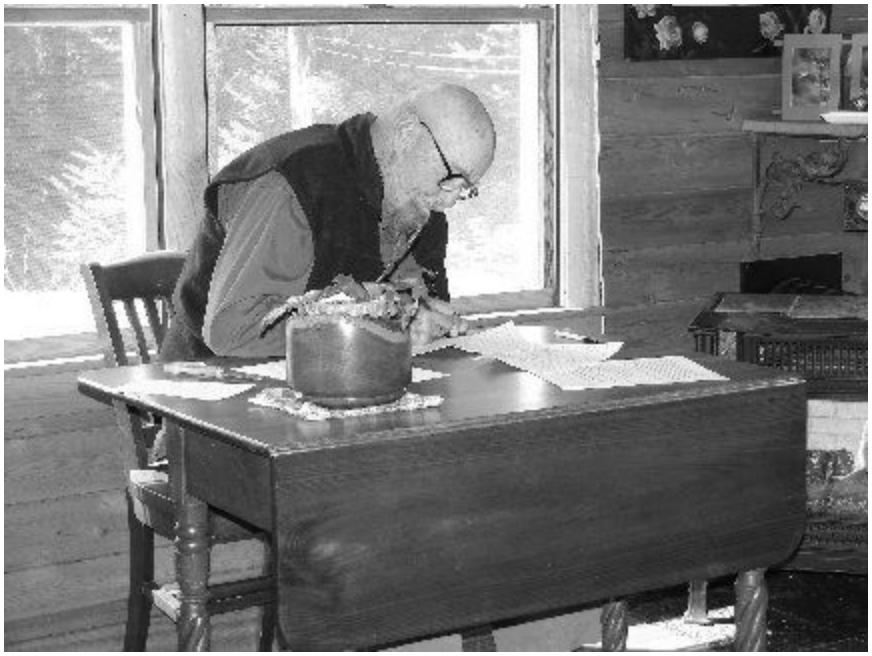
Dedication

Dee and I dedicate this book to the dear friends whose cooperation made this book the best it could be. We appreciate their help in editing and research almost as much as their friendship.

Dana Dunnan is a retired teacher who spent his career helping high school students. Judy Dunnan dedicated her life to being a speech pathologist, and is still changing students' lives.



Contents

1. On the Road Home 5

2. On Becoming a Shooter 14

3. Family Comes First 25

4. A Shooter turns Pro 49

5. Wrestling in the Far East 63

6. Some of the Women in My Life 82

7. On Top in the States 104

8. My Professional Colleagues 146

9. From Wrestler to Promoter 174

10. The Love of My Life 209

11. My Beloved Luna 228

12. Fighting for My Life 244

13. A Villain becomes Santa 267

14. A Few Final Thoughts from Paul and Dee 283

Photo Credits 288

Suggested Reading 290

Index 291

Chapter 1

On the Road Home

-1-

One translation of a Chinese proverb is “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

That saying is referred to so often as to become a cliche. However, that status is evidence of the truth that people find in it.

I’d like to take you on some of the steps on my journey so far.

My first baby steps were in Montreal, a city to which I would return as I entered manhood.

My steps between those two periods were mostly in the rural country on the border of Vermont and Quebec.

Once I reached the confident stride of manhood, my steps led me to wrestle around the world. Then I stepped back into the United States and Canada, wrestling across North America.

After my wrestling ended, my steps have slowed, to the point of needing assistance. My footprints have returned to the area where I grew up. I still travel, but my wanderlust is somewhat tempered by physical reality.

Join me on my journey.

As you hear my voice in your head, it will be accompanied sometimes by the voice of my wife Deana, or Dee. Her voice will be indicated by a change in what you see; the ***bold italics*** will be her.

Instead of the gruff, raspy voice of an ex-wrestler, who drank, and smoked and chewed cigars for years, you will hear her gentle voice.

Well, not that gentle. She was a Marine Staff Sergeant.

And she did drink, although not like I did.

And she did try cigars.

But we will tell you about that later.

-2-

I was raised on a dairy farm, on Vermont State Highway 105, which starts in the east on the New Hampshire border, crosses the northern part of Vermont, and, in order to get around the big ski mountain of Jay Peak, it has to go into Canada.

More specifically, into the province of Quebec, and, for the next 12 miles, Highway 105 runs thru Canada. That's where I was raised, on a dairy farm owned by my parents, Ferdinand and Marguerite Vachon. Then Highway 105 goes back into Vermont at East Richford, to finally end up at St. Albans, Vermont.

-3-

It certainly does not qualify as a famous road like The Alaska Highway, Route 66 in the US, or the TransCanada Highway that runs from Newfoundland 5,000 miles to British Colombia.

But, as it turns out, now that I've started writing and thinking about it, it has been the main street of my life, incredible as that may seem for someone who, in their lifetime, has traveled 8,000,000 miles in over 30 countries.

I travelled the Nullarbor Plains highway in Australia, past Ayers Rock.

I followed the road to Nepal from New Delhi, India, going to Kathmandu.

I also traveled the Autobahn in Germany, the San Diego Freeway, went to Rome on the Appian Way, and traveled the Burma Road following the Ganges River, through Bangladesh, to the Bay of Bengal.

-4-

At the risk of sounding redundant, it's incredible that Vermont State Highway 105, and what happened to me on it, shaped and influenced my

life more than any of those above-mentioned roads. Even more incredible, since my part of 105 was a dirt road that became muddy and impassable every spring, or any time we had heavy rain.

I was not born on Highway 105, but the events that were to shape my life certainly happened there.

The reader at this point could be thinking that I was a Vermonter, but no, I was just a French-Canadian farm boy who didn't know how to speak English until he was 13 years old.

My father, Ferdinand Vachon, "Fred" to his friends, had moved all his 12 children and his wife, Marguerite, there from the big city of Montréal, where he was a detective sergeant in the police force for 20 years.

This was in 1947, and, at that time, Vermont Highway 105 went through three very small towns in Canada, before going back into the US.

The first town was Highwater, where there was then the Boucher Hotel, a well-known watering hole used by all American travelers looking for good Canadian beer. After that, Highway 105 would cross over the Canadian Pacific railroad crossing at Highwater.

Just a quarter-mile further, after going over two bridges, 105 turns left, going towards the little town of Dunkin, going past farms owned by descendants of loyalists who moved there from the US at the time of the American Revolution. The farmers have names like Wilkins, Bailey, Sargeant, Fullerton, Sherrer, Aiken, Burnham, Davis, Larock, Eastman. Names like those sure resemble a list of Vermont residents, yet they are Canadians.

At Dunkin, you go up a short, steep hill, with a cemetery on the right, where gravestones date back to the early 19th century with those same names on them.

Our farmhouse was half a mile further, on the right, built on the side of a green mountain. That house was 100 years old in the 1940s, when it became our family farmhouse. Behind our house was 200 acres of forest, covering a

1,500 foot high mountain, including a sugar bush. Every late winter or early spring, we would tap from 3,000 to 4,000 maple trees.

Across Highway 105 was the flattest, most fertile 80 acres of prairie in that river valley. It was a dairy farm milking 25 cows, and worked by two horses, Dick and Gerry, plus one mare named Maude.

-5-

Route 105 also was the path for my first three and a half-mile walk to Catholic school. For a nine-year-old city boy, walking that distance twice a day on the dirt road was pretty boring. Not to mention that having walked to school you had to walk back after school. Fortunately, it was not uphill both ways; actually it was up and down both ways.

The schoolhouse was in a private house. Downstairs, on one side, was the chapel, and, on the other side, was a private apartment. The upstairs part was also divided in two. One half of the upstairs was the schoolroom and, in the other half, was the small apartment where the teacher lived. Our classroom was about 15 to 20 feet long and 12 feet wide.

One teacher taught all grades, from the first grade to the seventh grade for about 15 to 20 kids. I am a great believer in that system of teaching.

Kids were exposed to the lessons and teachings of all grades. It worked well for me; too bad they don’t do it like that anymore.

This schoolhouse was 3 ½ miles away from my home, in the small village of Glen Sutton. The schoolhouse, as of 2010, was still there, although someone had moved it about 150 feet away from Route 105.

-6-

Down the street from the school was the other watering hole for Yankee travelers, the Glen Sutton Hotel, where, a few years later, my father bought me my first beer. Mind you I was already six-foot one and 185 pounds.

He and I had just spent three months in the lumber camps, working for the Brown Corporation at Sanmaur, Quebec. Sanmaur was a company town, where the only road that goes there is the railroad. It's about 400 miles from our farm.

Long before that, at the age of 10, I served my first mass as an altar boy, right there in the chapel in Glen Sutton, downstairs from the one room school I was attending.

Later on in my life, having taken a train in Montréal to go wrestle in Boston as a rookie wrestler just 18 years old, I was all excited about the train ride.

I had bought a lower berth, on the left side of the train, so that as the train *choo-chooed* its way past the old farmhouse, my younger siblings and my parents would be out there in front of the house. From across the valley, with aprons, towels, and rags, they stood waving at me, as if to usher me out into the world to find my end of the rainbow.

We had, as kids growing up, done that every time anybody had come to visit us from Montréal by train, or had come home by train. As kids, we loved to do that. It was like a ritual.

On this particular trip I didn't get off in Highwater, or hire Mr. Smith and his taxi to take me to the farm house, as was the custom for anybody that came to visit.

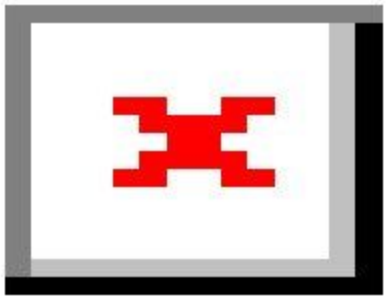
On my train ride to Boston this time, I stayed on the train and was enjoying my berth and reading, when I felt the train stop. So I opened up the shade and found myself right smack dab in the middle of Vermont State Highway 105, in the middle of Newport's Main Street.

That picture has been stuck in my memory for over 50 years, and it comes back to me nowadays every time I go over that railroad crossing.

That train ride was the beginning of a journey that took me many times around the world.

Looking back to that night sitting in my lower berth bunk, right smack dab in the middle of Newport's Main Street and Vermont Highway 105, I

remember thinking “This is probably the last time I will ever see this place.”



Man, was I ever wrong.

-7-

As I am reading Paul’s writings, it occurred to me that, on that very day the train had stopped in the middle of Main Street, in Newport, Vermont, on route 105, when he was l8, and headed out on his life journey, that I was just a couple of blocks up the street, on route 105.

I was 5.

It would be 36 years before we were that close again.

Chapter 2

On Becoming a Shooter

-1-

My brother Mad Dog was wrestling in Texas, when I won the silver medal in the Provincial Amateur Wrestling Championship. I wrestled for the province of Québec, which entitled me to represent my province in the Canadian Championship; in those days, it was called the Dominion Championship. It was being held that year in Regina, Saskatchewan.

In 1947, after spending 20 years as a policeman in the city, my father decided to move our family to a farm in the country. I was then nine years old.

He felt he could care for his family better on a farm than on a detective's salary.

A major factor in that was having 12 children. My parents were practicing Catholics, and they apparently practiced a lot.

So he withdrew his contributions from his pension fund, and used it to buy a 300 acre farm for, as I remember it, $30,000. He also took out a loan from the government, which took him 35 years to pay off.

When I was 14, I traveled twice a week, to the YMCA in Montréal, to learn to wrestle. Sometimes I would hitchhike, and sometimes I rode the train. The 85 mile trip was worth it. That's where the nearest wrestling coaches were. I learned my craft from legends in coaching: Frank Saxon and Chief Bill Cowley from Wigan, England, and Bob McNabb from Canada.

We lived in the Green Mountains, 85 miles southeast of Montréal and ½ mile from the Vermont border in the United States. Needless to say, our financial situation was dire. The Amateur Athletic Union paid for the first-place finisher to go to the Dominion Games, but they did not pay for the

second-place finisher, who was eligible and could go to the games, provided that he paid his own way.

My father said that, somehow, we would find a way. He had been working in the woods for one of our neighbors, Jean-Paul Breuleux, hauling logs with his team of horses. My father borrowed $70 from him in advance. The bus trip to Regina, Saskatchewan was $64 round-trip.

I hitchhiked 85 miles into Montréal. I hooked up with my friend Earl Carroll, a 160 pounds class wrestler from the YMCA, who had also come in second in the Provincials. He, too, was paying his way.

In those days, there was no highway that went across Canada, so the trip to the nationals out West by bus took three days and three nights. Our mothers had fixed us lunch baskets that would last a three-day trip. The bus took us through the cities of Toronto, Detroit, Chicago, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Winnipeg and then Regina. It never stopped for more than one hour for breaks, with the exception of Chicago, where we had a two-hour break.

In Chicago, Earl and I walked to the local YMCA for a workout on the mat. We were really going at it fast and furious, in order to get a decent workout in such a short time. The local wrestling coach was just coming in, to get ready for his evening class. He seemed surprised to see us there, but was impressed with our ability and speed. He was curious to know who we were. We told him that we were on our way to the Canadian championships.

He said, “Any time you want to wrestle for my club, you can.” He also told us that he could get us jobs and green cards.

It was tempting, but we said, “No thanks”. We had other fish to fry at the moment. We had spent a little too much time there already.

When we left the YMCA, we looked at the time, and saw that we had about 5 minutes to cover 12 blocks of Chicago streets. Instead of taking the city bus, we ran. This was no big deal for a couple of young amateur wrestlers out to see the world for the first time.

As we came running, our bus was leaving, so we had to flag it down. We jumped in. The bus driver said “I thought I had someone missing”.

(In later years I saw Earl Carroll again. By that time, I had grown from 191 pounds to 340 pounds. He had kept his weight to about 175 pounds. I reminded him of that time in Chicago, when he and I had chased the bus down after running 12 blocks and having a fast workout. I said, “I sure couldn’t do that now.” He said “I could.” Looking at him, I believed him, and told him so.)

After Chicago, it was off to Minneapolis, and then back into Canada, to Winnipeg. There we got a bit of a shock. Our bus driver said “This is where we do our layover. We leave tomorrow at 6 AM. Good night folks!”

Earl looked at me, and I looked at him. We had not come prepared for layovers. So once again, we walked to the YMCA, and asked about a room. We were told it was six dollars. Between the two of us, we had about $6.50. So we told them “no, thanks”, and left.

We figured that we would walk the streets until 6 AM, when our bus would leave. We would hang on to what little money we had. We knew that we still had the return trip to make to get back home. On that trip, there would be no lunches!

Winnipeg is so darned cold at night, even in May. I remembered something that my father had said when I was a kid. He said “If you ever get stuck or lost in a strange city, go to the police station and ask for assistance. They will find you a place to sleep.” My father, having been a policeman, knew about such things.

As we were looking for a police station, we met a policeman walking his beat. We told him our predicament. He said “I finish my shift at midnight, then the paddy wagon picks me up and takes me to the station. I will take you two guys with me, and we will talk to the sergeant and see what we can do.”

The sergeant said “The only way we can get you a place to sleep is if we book you. No charges or anything.”

So they took all of our valuables and gave us a bunk in a big communal cell, along with drunks, pimps, and criminals! Some of the people were dirty, some were sick, some had the DT’s, some were crying, and some

were throwing up. One transvestite made a pass at us. The bunks were made of wood and had no pillows. They were hard and dirty.

Needless to say, Earl and I didn't get any sleep that night. The police kicked us out at 5:30 AM. Earl and I figured we would've been better off walking the streets all night.

As we got out of jail, we noticed a store window a clock that said 5:50. We were still 10 or 11 blocks away from the bus depot. Once again, we took off running. When we were running, a bunch of wrestlers from the Winnipeg YMCA drove by in their car. They also were going to Regina for the Canadian championships. One of them had wrestled with us at the Montréal YMCA and recognized us. He hollered "You guys will never make it for the 3 PM weigh-in at Regina by running there!"

We made it to the depot by 10 min. of six. The clock in the store window had been fast.

We finished the last leg of our trip uneventfully.

-2-

My weight class was 191 pounds, light heavyweight. I weighed in at 191 pounds. ½ pound over was permitted, so I had made weight, with a little room to spare. Earl also made his weight class.

That night, the Amateur Athletic Union gave us a big reception at a huge hotel ballroom downtown. They fed us good old Western T-bone steaks, with all the trimmings. I remember thinking, as I went to bed in the bunk in the old Army barracks that housed us, that life as a traveling wrestler was going to be quite something.

I had only been on the road for three days, and already I had run down two main streets of big cities, been offered a job in Chicago, spent the night in jail, been wined and dined at a fancy hotel, and was now in the Army, or so it seemed!

Earl and I beat the wrestlers from Winnipeg. There were the ones that had sped by and laughed at us. We had beaten them all.

I had five matches in the tournament. I won one by pin, and won the other four by decision. That gave me four bad points. If a wrestler gets five bad points, he is eliminated.

In the finals, I wrestled a guy from Montréal, who had three previous bouts and a bye. He had won all three bouts by pins, and had no bad points. In order to win the gold I would've had to pin him. We wrestled to a draw. I could not pin him. Clearly, he was the better wrestler, and he got the gold medal. He deserved it.

As far as I was concerned, I had not been beaten. He was in his 30s, and had 15 years of experience on me. I was 17 and really proud of myself.

Before I left the next morning, I picked up a newspaper. The sports section headline read "Montréal wrestlers clean up the medals". Underneath was an action picture of two wrestlers, another guy and myself. I felt I was already a star. I was walking on air!

Earl and I got a chance to go back to Montréal by train. The guy I wrestled in the finals was a big shot on the Canadian National Railway. His name was Bob Hornblower.

Earl took the train. I didn't. I wanted to go back to Chicago, and find the guy at the YMCA that offered us a job if we would wrestle for him. When I got to Chicago, I called my brother Maurice (later to become Mad Dog). He was wrestling in Texas. I told him the good news about my silver medal.

He said "Good. That's enough amateur. You will never make any money doing it. When I come back home this summer, you'll turn pro at 191 pounds."

Mad Dog's success in professional wrestling had been aided by his enormously successful amateur career. Many promoters preferred wrestlers with amateur experience; they called them "shooters".

I didn't think I would be big enough. A year later, I was 240 pounds. That summer, I did turn pro.

Paul's years as a wrestler were amazingly injury-free.

The same was not true of the childhood I was experiencing as his wrestling career began.

We moved from Main Street when I was 7. My parents had bought an old farm house, with 22 acres, with the idea of fixing it up.

I <u>loved</u> it there.

The only drawback to it was that the front of the house was close to the road. Every day mom would send me outside and always say, "Go up back and play." The neighbor kids would come down, and we would all go up back to play, except for this one winter day.

The snow around the house had been piled up sky high, and we all decided that we wanted to slide down the pile. Of course, it led into the road, but there was plenty of room in the driveway to turn and end up near the garbage cans.

When it was my turn, I walked up the pile and put my sled down and decided to sit on it and steer with my feet. I had always lain down to steer with my hands, and dragged my feet to help in those big turns.

But this time, down I went, and when it came time to turn, my foot slipped, and out into the road I went. Right in front of an oncoming car.

I was pretty broken up, but still alive. My right leg, just below the knee, was hanging on by muscle. The doctor came out of the emergency room to tell my parents that it would be a miracle if I survived. If I did, my leg was going to have to be amputated just below the knee. Immediately!

My Dad said, "Nope. Now you go in there and save her life, and save her leg, too."

I was in the Newport City hospital for months. For the first couple of months, I was in a full body cast, with only my toes and fingers showing.

Not a day went by when my mom and dad did not come to see me. My mother had just had my baby brother, Ted, two months before my

accident. Friends and neighbors would stop by and watch him, so she could come spend time with me.

My dad was the oil deliveryman for the Northeast Kingdom, and planned his route around a trip to the hospital to visit me, every day. We didn't have much, but we had love.

Every day I would receive gifts, books, coloring books, dolls, anything a 7 year old could ever ask for. My second grade teacher would come in twice a week to bring me work and read to me. When she didn't read to me, the nurses did. There were folks that I didn't even know that came just to read to me.

After I was fully back together, I was discharged, leg and all. I spent my high school years playing every sport I could and raising hell on the back roads with the best of them.

From the day I left the hospital, to the day I left home, I was always under a watchful eye. I had touched the lives of many, and to them, I would always be that 7-year old who spent months in the hospital.

It was there that my values had been molded, that I was taught the true meaning of love, how to live and life….and that formed who I became.

There is no place like home….

Just a few years ago, I saw Doctor Mosher and stopped him to thank him again for saving my life.

He took my hand, and looked me directly in the eyes, and said, "I was there Deana, but I didn't save your life. It was out of my hands."

Chapter 3

Family Comes First

-1-

My father Ferdinand was 6 feet tall, tough, and weighed 230 pounds.

He had great big hands and was jovial. He was a big man, with a big voice.

He and his partner were men of identical build and disposition. They used to run the morality squad in the Police Department. Their district was the port of Montréal, which was the red light section of town. Although they were issued revolvers, they never used them. Their fists were persuasion enough!

One time, while riding somewhere with my dad in an unmarked detective car, a call came over the radio. There was a brawl and riot going on at a bar and dance hall. My father told me that there was no time to take me home. He asked me how high I could count. I was seven. I told him I could count to 100.

He picked up his partner, Euclid Jette, and together they went in the bar, armed only with their fists. They quelled the riot. I did what I was told and sat in the car outside and counted. Bodies were flying out of the bar. My dad and Euclid threw people out one by one or two by two. The final count was 26.

Let me tell you, when my father told us boys to jump, we said, “How high?”

-2-

When I was five years old, my family lived on the city limits of Montréal, where my father was a detective sergeant on the vice squad.

But that wasn't his biggest job.

His biggest job was to keep his children in line, and the most troublesome of those was my 13-year-old big brother, who was already showing characteristics that would lead to the name Mad Dog.

He was forever getting into fights and brawls with other tough boys in the neighborhood and my father was having to spend most of his time at home disciplining him. At five years old, I was not yet in school, so I used to play and roam around in adjacent fields with a friend who was about two years older than me. Ti-Jean Rollin was probably not the best playmate for me since he was supposed to be in school, but he never went, and was considered the bad boy of our neighborhood.

At the end of our street was a big field which we kids called Le Champ des Foux, which translated means The Crazies' Field. It was tilled and cared for by trustees from a mental hospital that owned the property. My mother warned me many times to stay away from there, but my little buddy Ti-Jean didn't take orders from anyone's mother, not even his own. So I used to follow him across the field to play at the dump that was used by the hospital.

There's an old saying that some people's junk is someone else's treasure-that is a principle that flourishes at most flea markets.

The treasure I found on one particular day certainly had life-changing repercussions for my brother Maurice and me. What I found and scavenged at the dump that day was a brand-new (at least to me) empty 55 gallon apple barrel.

I was so pleased to be rolling it home to give to my mother. She was really going to be proud of me. It was way too big for a five-year-old to carry, so I rolled it all the way across The Crazies' Field.

At the head of my street, I saw this teenager who had been shooting birds with his BB gun. He and the friend who was with him must've been playing hooky that day. When they spotted me rolling my beautiful barrel down the street, they wanted it. When I didn't give it up, they shot at me with the BB

gun. I had short pants on and a couple of BBs hit me on the thigh. It hurt like hell and I went crying and wailing all the way home.

By the time I got home, the pain had gone away, but I kept on crying, because I had lost that beautiful like-new wooden apple barrel. My mother had just put the younger babies down for their afternoon nap when I told her what had happened. My mother would've liked to go get my barrel back for me, but could not leave her three babies alone.

So she said, “Here, have a piece of cake that Mommy just made and you can stop crying. Your brothers will be home from school soon and they will get your barrel back for you.”

I sat there on the porch eating my cake and waited for my brothers to come home. Maurice was always the first one to come home as he was raising a bunch of homing pigeons in our backyard chicken coop (just like the young Mike Tyson did). Maurice needed to feed them and take care of them, when he wasn’t in trouble for fighting.

When I saw him coming, I started with the tears again and told him about my beautiful apple barrel. I swear I heard him growl like the Mad Dog that he was destined to be.

My mother came out and told them to go and get his little brother's apple barrel- as if he needed telling. We went to pick up a couple of his friends. He carried me on his shoulders, as we went to the villain's house and found him and his buddy holed up on their screen back porch, still waving the BB gun and feeling foolishly safe behind the screen door.

We could see they had locked the screen door with an old-fashioned wooden clothes pin, which was the method everybody used for locking screen doors. That worked to keep the wind from blowing the door open, but was not worth a hoot to keep away the Mad Dogs that were at their door.

We could see the barrel on the porch as the guy waived his BB gun around. 13-year-old Maurice kicked the door in, dragged the 17-year-old out in his yard and punched him in the face until he was bloody and crying.

Maurice's anger was gone. He grabbed my hand and we went home. We were so flushed with the success of our revenge that we forgot about the barrel. We never saw it again, but the story was far from over.

That evening, the boy's father came to our house, just as my dad was coming home himself. We were familiar with the boy's father, because we used to see him every morning and evening pedaling past our front door on his way to and from work, carrying his lunch box tied to the rack over his back wheel.

The man told my father that he wanted to tell him what damage his hoodlum son had done to his home and family. Of course, his son had never told him about the BB gun or the barrel or anything like that. However, given Maurice's reputation, the allegations seemed valid, without even mentioning any provocation.

When the man left, my father let out an animal-like roar, so loud that everybody up and down the street heard him.

“MAURICE!”

It scared the hell out of me.

He started looking for Maurice. I knew Maurice was in the backyard playing with and feeding his pigeons as he hadn't been able to do that earlier, because of his barrel retrieval mission.

When he found him, my father raged at Maurice for at least half an hour, calling him every bad boy name in the book. I was hiding under my bed, scared to come out.

I remember my father told him that on his job, he arrested people and send them to jail for doing what he had done, and he might do that with him yet. Maurice tried to explain why he had done what he did, but my father never let him talk.

Later on, once that had subsided, my mother told them what had happened as she knew it. She told him about the BBs that had hit her little Paul.

My dad relented a little and told Maurice he would learn his fate the next day after school. At this point in his life, my father had been threatening to put Maurice in reform school.

Everyone in the neighborhood had heard Maurice getting chewed out, including the bicycle-riding father.

Maurice was on parole with our father at this point and was allowed to go to school until his sentence could be reviewed.

The next morning, the bicycle rider stopped in the middle of the street to taunt Maurice and gloat over what my father had said to him. He said that Maurice wouldn't dare touch his son again.

Maurice snatched the man off his bicycle and beat the hell out of him. Beating completed, Maurice picked up his schoolbag and went off to school.

It was a couple of days until my father heard about the beating, Although he realized his son had been provoked into delivering the beating, he decided that if Maurice had such a bad temper, he would have to find a way to harness it and put it to good use.

Soon thereafter, he took Maurice to the Montréal Central YMCA on Drummond Street. It was the only place that he knew of that could teach Maurice how to box.

My father loved every sport, but had never had the chance to participate in any of them. He was a boxing fanatic who could tell you all the past champions going back to Jack Johnson, who he felt was the greatest of all time.

When Maurice and my dad got to the YMCA, they met a policeman friend of my father's named Cowley. Cowley was the chief of the police that patrolled the Port of Montréal. Because the red light area that my dad's vice squad patrolled bordered on the Port of Montréal, he and Cowley knew each other well.

Chief Cowley asked my dad why Maurice was with him. My father told him that 13-year-old Maurice was always fighting and in trouble, and he

wanted him to learn to box.

Chief Cowley told my dad not to take Maurice to the boxing room because all boxers, even the champions, wind up punchdrunk.

He said, “Let my friend the wrestling coach, Frank Saxon, work with him. We're in luck, the wrestling room is open tonight.”

Cowley introduced my dad and Maurice to Frank Saxon and then went off to work out on his own.

My dad told Saxon he went wanted Maurice to be taught a lesson and to learn that he wasn't so tough.

Frank Saxon said he knew exactly what to do.

Because all of this conversation was in English, Maurice had no idea what they were saying.

Frank said to Maurice, in French, “I hear from your father that you're pretty tough guy.”

Frank pointed to an old looking balding, skinny, even bony looking old man and said “see that old man over there? Why don't you wrestle with him and show us what you can do, but don't be too rough on him. He's just an old guy.”

The “old guy” was Chief Cowley, whose appearance was completely different out of street clothes and in wrestling gear.

My father watched Maurice's face light up as Maurice figured this was his chance to shine. Maurice tore into him, and that was the last move Maurice made.

Chief Jim Coley was Frank's assistant coach. Like Frank, he was from Wigan, England, and was one of the greatest leg wrestlers of his day. Young Maurice found himself locked up to the point of having a hard time breathing, and the more he fought and strained, the more entangled he became.

That went on for 15 minutes. When Maurice was finally let go, he said that he would not quit wrestling until he could beat that old man. Five years later, Maurice represented Canada in the 1948 London Olympics.

And so the Vachons entered the world of wrestling. All over a barrel.

Chief Jim Cowley developed many wrestlers, myself as well as Maurice. Cowley lived to be 97 years old and was very proud of what Maurice became. In his last days in an old folks home, he had become senile. He kept rocking in his chair, repeating two words

“Maurice Vachon, Maurice Vachon, Maurice Vachon.”

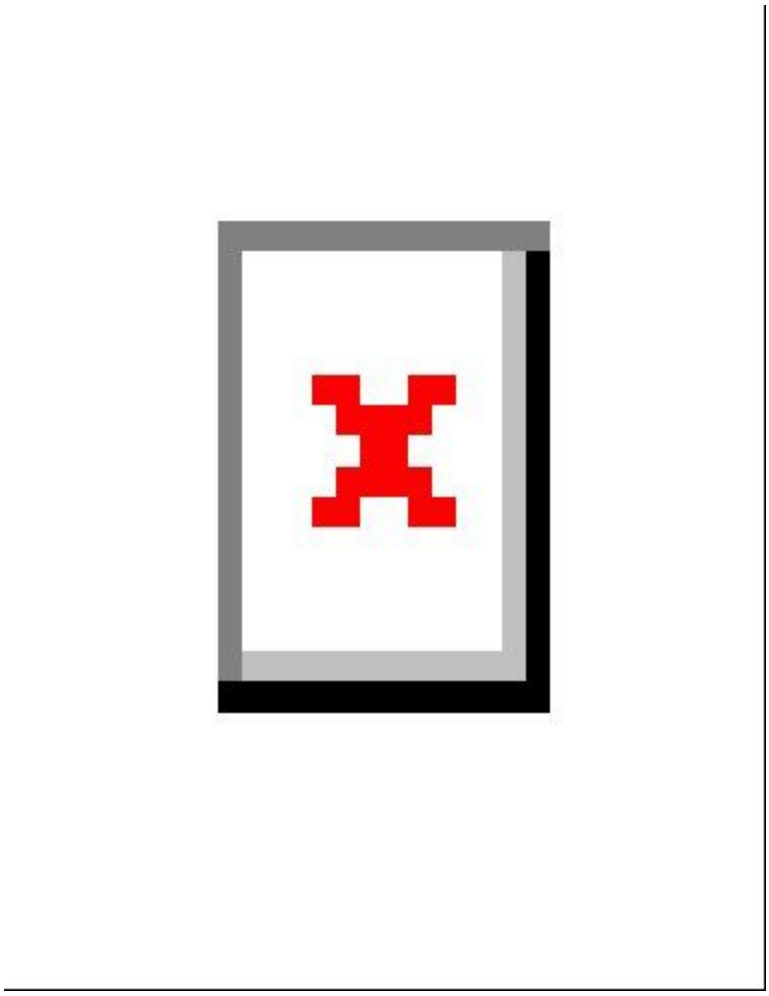
I honor Chief Cowley's life and what he did for the Vachons.

“Chief Jim Coley, Chief Jim Cowley, Chief Jim Cowley. “

-3-

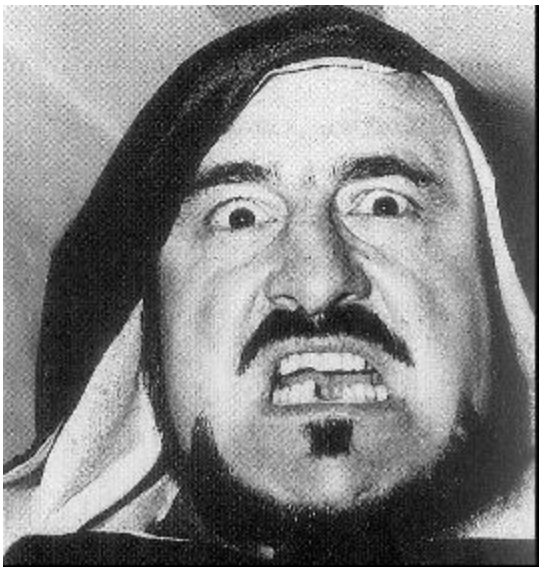
My older brother Mad Dog was undoubtedly one of the best conditioned athletes in the 1948 Olympic Games. He had been training since the age of 13, doing 100 to 150 push-ups every day, 100 to 150 bridges, running 10 to 15 miles three times a week, and often training with me on his shoulders. He also spent three nights a week at the YMCA, from 7 PM until 10 PM, wrestling on the mat with all comers, big, small, or medium.

In 1950, Mad Dog won a gold medal for Canada in what is now known as the Commonwealth Games, comprised of all the countries that had once belonged to British Empire.



When Maurice turned professional, he was given the name Mad Dog by a promoter in Portland, Oregon. Before we ever became tag team partners, he was main event material in cities like Chicago, Denver, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Omaha, and Des Moines. He had become the AWA world heavyweight champion when I asked him for help to return to the United States. He gave me the money to return to the United States from London. When I returned to the United States, I began wrestling in the Kansas City territory.

I didn’t earn the name “The Butcher” from working as a butcher. However, Mad Dog’s name did match up with certain aspects of his personality.



(Photo courtesy of Dr. Mike Lano)

One night, we were defending our title in Denver. After we won our match, we went out and had a few beers, sang a few songs, and generally had a good time.

At about 2:30 AM, Mad Dog wanted something to eat before he went to bed, so he walked a block and a half to an all-night diner. He was having something to eat when three guys who had been at the matches that night, and had been drinking ever since, entered the diner. They ordered something to eat, spotted Mad Dog alone, and thought it was a great opportunity.

They started talking out loudly about what they were going to do when he got out of the diner. Mad Dog pretended to go to the bathroom, phoned me, and said, “Start walking towards the diner and come and meet me. These three guys want to give me a hard time. They have been drinking, and I don’t know if they are just talking or they are serious.”

I told a taxicab driver, who was a big fan of the Vachons, what was happening, and he said, “Let’s go in the cab,” and we did.

The three guys got to Mad Dog about the same time as we did. Mad Dog was sort of bent over, just warding off blows, and letting them think he they

had him, all the while delaying them until I got there. All that happened in the matter of seconds, in fact, in less time than it takes to tell this tale.

We were punching them up and down, and one of them said, “Let’s get the hell out of here!” At that time, I had one of them by the collar, and was throwing him towards a plate glass storefront window. However, he slipped out of my grasp and started running.

Just then a black taxi driver slammed on his brakes and asked what happened. Our taxi driver friend told him that three guys had tried to beat up Mad Dog. He said, “What?”

He reached under his seat, took out a gun, and started shooting at the guys running away. We heard three shots. We heard one of them holler, but they kept on running off into the darkness and around some buildings and we never saw them again.

Later we heard from our friend the driver that one of them had arrived at a Denver hospital with a gunshot wound to the neck, saying he was a victim of a drive-by shooting.

-5-

It was common for French Canadian families to have 10 or 12 kids, or even more. It was also proper to have the older kids become godparents of the younger babies, once the bigger kids were old enough.

I, being the seventh child, at 13, became the Godfather of Vivian, the 13th child. Was I ever proud of that fact! Normally you would have to be 16 or 17.

Now, in the Catholic way, the purpose of the godparents is to take over spiritual and religious upbringing of the child in case of early death or incapacity of the parents to do so. Also, in large French Canadian families, it was done so that the older child would help with and feel responsible for the economic welfare of the child and be of help to the parents.

I took my responsibility seriously. By the time Vivian was five, I was already wrestling, and would take her with me everywhere. One time in

particular, I took her on the train to Montréal, so she could see the Santa Claus parade that Eaton's department store would put on every Christmas season. That was quite a memorable trip for a five-year-old country girl. In later years, she would always remind me of that day and how well she remembered it.

One night, 30 years later, at 3 AM, while I was waiting for her to come back from visiting her ex-husband in Minnesota,

(Photo by Dr. Mike Lano)

the Québec provincial police showed up at the old homestead door. They told me that she, and her 10-year old daughter, Julie, had been killed instantly in a head-on collision with a pickup truck driven by a 19-year-old drunk driver and his equally drunk 22-year-old brother. They were so drunk that when the police got there, these two brothers could not remember who had been driving at the time they killed these two beautiful souls. Julie had been a carbon copy of her mother, with long, braided, blonde hair and blue eyes. All I could think of was that little five-year-old girl that I had taken to see the Santa Claus parade and that we would never get to go to again.

I'm grateful for my career in professional wrestling. In what other business can you have crowds of thousands eating out of your hands, and, because of your actions in the ring, build them up to a crescendo of pleasure, then bring them back down to the depths of despair, crying real tears, and, then, jumping right back up again, jumping for joy? All for a few dollars to get in. Although everybody in the house now seems to hate you and call you a

bastard, you know that you're not, they only hate you because you did your job well.

It teaches you that in life, things are not always what they seem, and the best we all can do is take life as it comes. I can't think of any other business where thousands of people are in the palm of your hand and you can make them run the gamut of emotions, unless perhaps it's being a stage actor. Now I understand why some actors just want to go back to the stage, although they can do movies or television. In those mediums they cannot see their audience and read their faces, and I saw a million faces.

-7-

In 1967, Mad Dog was in a terrible car accident, not far from Québec City. I drove from Atlanta to see him in the hospital.

The doctor who was taking care of him took me aside that day to talk to me about his condition. He said, "For now, your brother is paralyzed from the waist down. It is probable that he will never walk again, but surely he will never wrestle again."

I said, "Doctor, you don't know my brother like I do. Let me say this, if he walks, he will also wrestle again."

Two months later, while waiting in a long line in one of the pavilions at the world's fair, Mad Dog got into a fight with a guy that tried to cut in front of him. So Mad Dog hit him with his crutch. Less than six months after that, he was wrestling again, and did so for another 18 years, until he retired at the ripe young age of 56. He was made of iron.

Someone should write a book about him.

Maurice «Mad Dog» Vachon
en collaboration avec Louis Chantigny
UNE VIE DE CHIEN
DANS UN MONDE DE FOUS
Collection biographie / Guérin littérature

In 1987, as Mad Dog was doing his early-morning run at 6:30 AM, just outside of Des Moines Iowa, as he had every day of his life. He was struck by a hit-and-run driver who had been drinking all night. He was left for dead, and almost did die. When he finally did get to the hospital in Des Moines, he had very little blood left in him. We found out later that athletes that work out a lot have the equivalent of a pint of blood more than the average person, and that was probably what saved him.

I learned of Maurice's accident 24 hours later, when the doctor from the Iowa City hospital he had been airlifted to reached me at channel 10 in Montréal, where I was taking part in a program about professional wrestling. The doctor told me my brother had been in a bad accident and would probably lose his left leg, because it was all torn up.

I got in my car and drove 24 hours nonstop. When I walked into his room, he was surrounded by five or six doctors and nurses who were talking to him about his condition. Mad Dog was the first one to spot me and, pointing, he said, "There's my brother now."

As they turned around, all of them did a double take, and one of them said to me, "Are you guys twins?" Though eight years older, and in poor condition, Mad Dog still looked as young as I did.

One of the doctors said, “Mr. Vachon, I’m the one that talked to you on the phone yesterday.”

I said, “Didn’t you tell me that you were going to amputate the left leg? Because looking at the left leg now, I see you have got it all patched up, with a couple of steel pins protruding, and the right leg is three times its normal size and looks like hell!”

As it turns out, what had happened was that, when he had first been flown in by emergency helicopter, they had x-rayed him from head to foot. They found multiple fractures in his left leg, but none in his right leg. They sort of ignored the right leg, which had been hemorrhaging internally, and when they finally noticed all the swelling, it was too late. Gangrene had set in and they had to amputate before it set into the rest of his body and killed him.

He had a condition that is called compartment syndrome. Although there is a sign in every emergency operating room that says to watch out for compartment syndrome, they did not do it. It’s a good thing they saved his left leg -although it had been smashed to pieces. He would have wound up with no legs at all, because the next day, they cut off his right leg.

That saved his life, and touched off a chain reaction of sympathy throughout the wrestling world and across Canada.

Channel 10 in Montréal flew a crew of reporters and cameramen in. The main newspapers in Canada all sent reporters. The hospital was so inundated with phone calls that the director of the hospital came and talked to me, and said, “This is clogging up the switchboard and its operators.”

Mad Dog was in a double room, although he was by himself and they took the phones out of there. He was so heavily sedated, he could not talk to anybody anyhow. They set me up with a desk and the two phones outside his room to take phone calls, and deal with flowers get well cards, letters, telegrams, and requests for interviews.

I awoke my heavily sedated brother so that he could talk to Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. The Premiers of Québec and Manitoba called, as did the captain of the Canadian hockey team called.

In the first 10 days, he received 40,000 communications, and they continued to trickle in for months.

Finally after two weeks, I felt I didn't need to stay any longer. I said to Maurice, "Brother, I have been here two weeks, and I have to go now." I had been wondering how he was going to adjust to the loss of his leg. He had been so active all his life: Olympic wrestler at 18, world champion in the pros, both as an individual and part of our tag team.

I said, "Mad Dog, since I've been here, I really have not had a chance to talk to you. Before I go, I want you to know what's on my mind. First thing is, I love you. The other thing is that the leg doesn't really matter. What matters is your head and what is in it and your attitude toward your loss."

Right away he cut me off and said in his gruff voice, "Don't you think I know that! You think I was born yesterday?"

Feeling rebuked a bit, I said, "Well, in that case, the hell with you! I'm leaving! Goodbye!" I left the hospital and walked to my car using quick steps, thinking that my brother Maurice would never ever use quick steps again for the rest of his life.

In case you are wondering, Mad Dog did sue the hospital in Iowa- and lost. Perhaps I have presented it as too much of an open-and-shut case, but I still don't see how he lost that lawsuit.

Chapter 4

A Shooter turns Pro

-1-

One day in 1957, my father, Ferdinand, was skidding logs with his horses for Mr. Breuleux, whose farm was on the mountain above Glen Sutton. My father got fed up with working in the rain and was on his way home with his horses.

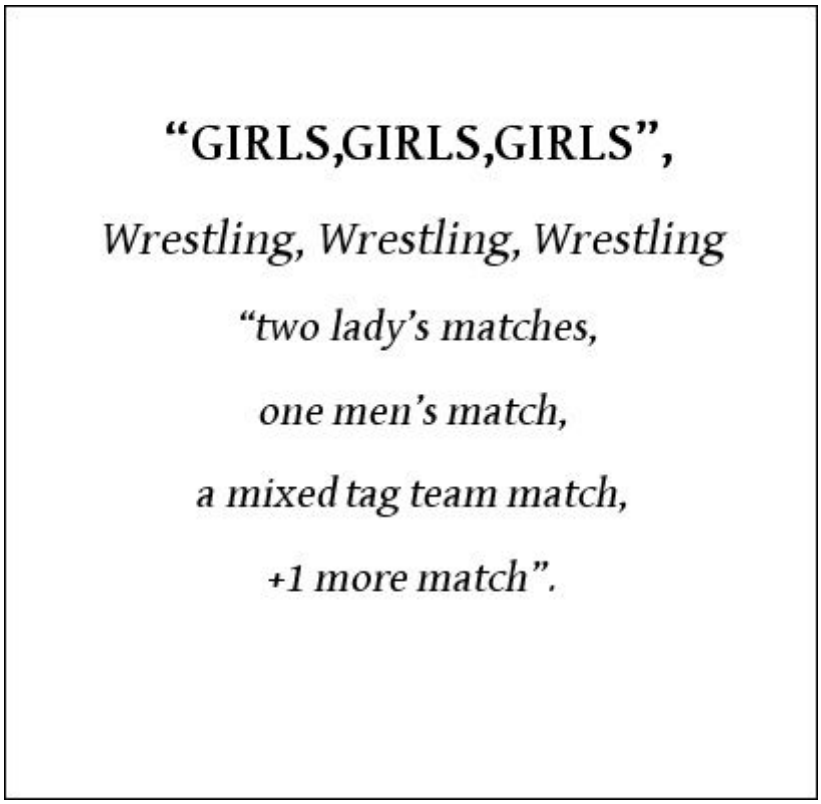
He stopped at Mr. Maynard's Glen Sutton Hotel for a well-deserved beer. Some guy walked in, asked the owner of the hotel for permission to put up some posters, and was told that he could. My father, who had always been a well-informed and inquisitive man, right away read it.

I was to become very familiar with what that poster said, because for the next six months, I was personally to put up thousands of them, in at least half a dozen states.

The man was Don Van Fleet, who was the last of a now-extinct breed of barnstorming one-night-stand wrestling promoters. Van Fleet was an old carney who had been present at the birth of modern-day professional wrestling.

In the carnivals back then, wrestling was a sideshow, and the poster that he was putting up sounded very much like an announcement that the sideshow carnival barker would've shouted out.

It read,



A mixed tag team match featured a man and a woman against another man and a woman. This kind of match had previously been unheard of, and was meant to be a big drawing card.

Van Fleet put on shows anywhere in the United States that did not have an athletic commission or any other sanctioning body that might have required him to have a license. And he did some shows where he probably did need a license, but he was in and out of town before they could catch up with him.

In those days, the wrestling business was divided into areas that were called territories. For instance, there was the Chicago territory, the New York territory, the Boston territory, the Houston territory, the Los Angeles territory, etc. These were areas where wrestling was organized and run on a regular basis. Each area had its permanent regular promoters. Some of them formed an alliance that was called the National Wrestling Alliance or NWA. This was done more to protect themselves from the demands of the wrestler than anything else. If any wrestler didn't do as he was told, he would be blackballed and could not work in any of the alliance territories.

That would leave opportunities for only the so-called outlaw outfits, like Van Fleet's, and a few others.

Professional Wrestling Territories of Canada and the United States
All-Star Wrestling (Vancouver)
Stampede Wrestling (Calgary)
Pacific Northwest Wrestling/ Portland Wrestling (Portland)
Big Time Wrestling (San Francisco)
World Wrestling Association/ NWA Hollywood Wrestling (Los Angeles)
Western States Wrestling Alliance (Phoenix)
Western States Sports (Amarillo)
World Class Championship Wrestling (Dallas)
Southwest Championship Wrestling (San Antonio)
Houston Wrestling (Houston)
50thState Big Time Wrestling/ Polynesian Pacific Wrestling (Honolulu)
American Wrestling Association (Minneapolis)
Northland Wrestling (North Bay)
Big Time Wrestling (Detroit)
NWA/International Wrestling (Montreal)
World (Wide) Wrestling Federation (New York)
National Wrestling Federation (Toledo/Cleveland)
Mid-Atlantic Championship Wrestling/ Jim Crockett Promotions (Charlotte)
Georgia Championship Wrestling (Atlanta)
World Wrestling Council (San Juan)
1
2
3
4a
4b
1 St. Louis Wrestling Club (St. Louis)
2 World Wrestling Association (Indianapolis)
3 NWA Mid-America/ Continental Wrestling Association (Memphis)
4a Southeast Championship Wrestling/ Continental Championship Wrestling (Knoxville)
4b Gulf Coast Championship Wrestling/ Continental Championship Wrestling (Dallas)

-3-

Van Fleet's operation went this way. Van Fleet went in one car doing the advanced work. He would pull into a gas station in the town that on the map looked promising (not too big, not too small), and would start pumping the attendant about the town.

He asked questions such as "Had there ever been any pro wrestling in that town? Was there a town hall, Legion Hall, or dance hall to be had?"

He kept his gas tank level purposely low so that he could always pull into a service station at a moment's notice and get local information. He said that perhaps a gas station attendant would be more cooperative if he bought gas. That way, they didn't think that you were freeloading information.

From that information, he would determine if that town was worth stopping at. If it was worth it, he would rent a hall, buy an ad in the local newspaper, and then plaster the town with the posters and flyers he carried in the trunk of his car.

Another car would be traveling behind Van Fleet, pulling the portable ring. In that car were two girl wrestlers, one of whom was married to Van Fleet, and two guy wrestlers.

That car would come into town the morning of the matches. The four people from the car would put up a ring, and then split up to spread the word-of-mouth publicity throughout the town.

Van Fleet had told us that you should walk and talk, to everybody you see, about the wrestling matches in town. Go into every bar, restaurant, and public place and talk it up! Then you go back to the building and get ready for the crowd that might or might not come, for that night's matches.

Van Fleet's four-person operation (not including him) was a marvel of efficiency. One of the girls would sell tickets while the other would referee

the men’s matches. The match was two out of three falls, after which there would be a short intermission.

This was really to give time for one of the guys that wrestled the first match to towel up a bit, wipe the sweat from his body, and go replace the girl that was selling tickets. She would then go into the ring for her bout with the other girl, who had been the referee in the men’s bout. The second guy would act as a referee in that two out of three falls match.

By the time that was over, the night’s performance was already one and a half hours long, and no more people were likely to come. So the box office would close, and we would ask someone in the audience, usually a local bigwig, to referee. The next bout was a mixed tag team match involving all four of the wrestlers, two out of three falls.

The evening’s entertainment would always last at least two hours. With all that entertainment for a couple of dollars, nobody ever complained that they didn’t get their money’s worth.

The names of the girls and the male wrestlers on the posters never changed, but the wrestlers themselves did. The posters, you see, were made of paper, and printed thousands at a time in advance. At the bottom of the poster was a space left blank, where the date, the town, and in what hall this big attraction was being held would be written in crayon. The one my dad read said

Next Saturday

Town Hall

Richford Vermont

Highway 105

My father, Ferdinand, perked right up. He spoke to Don Van Fleet, and told him about his boy Paul, one of eight boys. Paul had just won a silver medal for wrestling in the Canadian amateur wrestling championship in Regina, Saskatchewan and that he would really love to become a professional wrestler.

Right away, Van Fleet said “Send your boy to Richford Town Hall Saturday night. We will give him a tryout and, if he is any good, I will hire him.”

That Saturday night the local town hall was booked to capacity. Although it was not a very big town hall, it was full and most people there were seeing a wrestling match for the first time in their lives.

I was impressed. So was my father.

Van Fleet said, “I’m going to put you on with a guy named Jim Murphy. If I like what I see, you can come with us on the road.”

As it turned out, Jim Murphy was just the name that was on the preprinted poster. My opponent was really a Frenchman from Montréal. He was a little too short and a little too small to make it in the big territories.

I told the man wrestling under the name Jim Murphy what Van Fleet had told me; that if I looked good that night, I would go with them.

“Jim”, who rather liked the idea of having another French-Canadian to travel and wrestle with every night, said to me, “Don’t worry kid, just listen to me. You’ll look good.”

This guy was true to his word. In our match he did everything except put holds on himself. He had me doing drop kicks, flying head scissors, and doing things I didn’t know I could do.

As the match went on, I started feeling good about my chances of staying in the wrestling business, even if it was just an outlaw outfit. After it was all over, Van Fleet and his crew of wrestlers were taking down the wrestling ring. I was asked to help. I figured I was leaving that night with them. But it was not to be.

Van Fleet said the guy that normally wrestles every night with Jim Murphy was not there that night. That’s why I wrestled. “But he’s had an offer from the Goddamn alliance. (Van Fleet was always cursing the NWA. They were stealing his talents once he had broken in the man and taught him to perform.) He probably is going to quit, and then I’ll need you. You did good tonight. Jim Murphy really came through. He’s a good little wrestler and he carried you.”

That really deflated my ego. I fooled no one, especially that old Carny, Van Fleet!

-4-

My fate was in someone else's hands. It was somebody I didn't even know, named Cowboy Carlson. That's how I wound up being called Cowboy Carlson for the first few months of my career. He is the man whose place I had taken on the card.

And that Saturday night is where I had my first professional wrestling match in the US, right there at Richford town hall, on highway 105, in Vermont.

While Van Fleet left town that night without me, I did end up wrestling with him soon after, even if it was as Cowboy Carlson rather than Paul Vachon.

Working for Van Fleet was a good proving ground for a young wrestler. Over the next few months, we covered seven or eight states, from Vermont to Minnesota and never wrestled in the same place twice. It was also a good school for me as a would-be future promoter. I learned how to do publicity, sell tickets, rent a hall, set up the ring, put up posters etc. etc.

In the 1950s, more and more outfits like Van Fleet's were going out of business. Their fans were people that lived in small towns and had never had an opportunity to see a wrestling match. More and more wrestling was being seen on TV.

It was thought, and said, in those days, the TV was going to be the death of wrestling. When people could stay home and watch wrestling for free, why would they go out and pay to see it elsewhere?

It did kill the smaller outfits that could not or would not join in and use TV to promote wrestling. When wrestling had many territories, there were probably around 2000 people earning money wrestling. Nowadays, with professional wrestling in the United States under the control of Vince

McMahon’s organization, there are probably no more than one or two hundred people earning money in the ring.

That tour of Van Fleet’s that I had been on was his last.

-5-

I went on to wrestle for 32 years, took part in over 6,000 wrestling matches and traveled a total of eight million miles.

Years later, at 49 years old, I was thinking of retiring, none-too-soon, when, while sitting in my mother’s kitchen in the old farmhouse on 105, the phone rang.

It was a call from the Boston wrestling promoter, my old friend Killer Kowalski, asking me to do him a favor and substitute for the main event wrestler that was due to wrestle that weekend.

I said “Sorry, I don’t travel anymore. I have to stay here close to my mother.”

“No problem,” he said, “it’s just down the road from where you live.”

I said “Where?”

He said “It’s in St. Albans, Vermont, at the high school, right there at the end of 105.”

That was just about 20 miles away from Richford, Vermont, where I had had my first match 32 years before.

That’s why I say that my destiny has really been stuck to Vermont Highway 105 and it has really been the main street of my life.

-6-

In 1957, at the tender age of 19, I was shaving my head, had grown a beard, and was wrestling as a Russian.

I was in Houston, Texas, where the local promoters had been forced to segregate, meaning that black wrestlers could only wrestle other black wrestlers. There were not many black wrestlers that could make good money, because they had no one to wrestle.

The promoters had, for years, been trying to find a way to break the color barrier. An opportunity presented itself, when from Mexico came Dory Dixon, an exceptional black athlete, a gifted gymnast and wrestler.

The promoters had been reluctant to pit a black man against a white man in front of their segregated crowd, because they didn't know how they would react to a black man beating on a white man, and vice versa. Masquerading as a Russian while I wrestled in Texas, in the middle of the Cold War, I could be viewed as fair game for anybody to beat up on.

The Houston promoters made me part of Texas wrestling history when they booked me against Dory Dixon, not in the main event, mind you, and not in a special, either. They just booked us in a preliminary match to seem inconsequential to the crowd.

But it was a big thing. They even sent spotters into both crowds, black and white, to troubleshoot and assess the reaction.

I had met Dory a few minutes before the match. He was kind of nervous, and so was I, but I tried very hard not to show it. The promoters told me that if this experiment worked out okay that they had big plans for Dory Dixon, and could I make him look good? They, however, didn't mention what sort of plans they had for me, the pretend Russian.

Let's just say that making Dory Dixon look good was an effortless task, because he did that just by stepping into the ring. I have to say that he was one of the most charismatic wrestlers that I have met before or since.

Chapter 5

Wrestling in the Far East

-1-

In 1963, I was walking down the street in King's Cross, Sydney, Australia. (For those of you unfamiliar with that place, it's a lot like New York City's Greenwich Village, London's SoHo, or Paris' Montmartre…. All places that I have visited.)

Someone hollered at me from across the narrow street, "Hey Paul! The promoters want you in India!"

It was another wrestler whom I had met over in Australia. His name was Baron Von Hecksey. He was a big wrestler, of Hungarian descent, who had migrated to Australia as a result of the 1957 suppression of Hungary by the Soviet Union.

He told me his friend was looking for wrestlers for a tour of Pakistan. King Kong was another Hungarian expatriate. He had become a legend in the Asian subcontinent and the Middle East. He was organizing the East Pakistan Cyclone Relief Tour.

I negotiated a contract with King Kong for three months. I wound up staying in the Indian subcontinent for a year and a half. I made movies with the great Dara Sing, shook hands with the president of Pakistan, attended Nehru's funeral, met and sang for Duke Ellington, and sang on Pakistan's state radio station.

I walked across the no man's land that was then between Pakistan and India. I witnessed the results of so-called border skirmishes. I saw the bodies of men freshly killed. Some had their throats cut!

-2-

When I landed in Karachi, King Kong himself met me at the plane. He was then acting as agent, manager, and intermediary for all foreign wrestlers that came to Pakistan. Picture him: 6 feet tall, 520 pounds, no neck, a beard, and cauliflower ears. He was as big around as he was tall. He wobbled when he walked because of his worn-out knee joints.

He took us through customs and immigration, loudly saying to the customs agents, “These gentlemen are with me and they come from far away to beat all your so-called “Pelwans” (wrestlers). You don’t need to check their bags, for they’re smuggling gold and none of it is for you. It’s all for me….ha..ha..ha.”

Bowing, they said “Yes, yes, Mr. King Kong. Yes, Bara Sab (big man).”

We all got into an old open convertible La Salle taxicab from the 1930s. As we drove into the night, we were dodging all kinds of vehicles, some camel drawn, some donkey drawn, and some horse drawn, as well as all kinds of trucks and old cars.

There were many, many people, even at four in the morning. Some of the people were traveling on the right side of the road, some on the left, and some in the middle. We were traveling at high speeds and it seemed to me that we were trying to hit all of them.

The driver was so proud of his important passengers. He wanted to show off. He was going so fast and carrying such a big load that a mile from the hotel his car broke down when it hit a pothole. A spring broke and the two

back tires blew. King Kong had no patience with the driver's ineptitude and he beat him with his cane. He stopped a wagon that was being pulled by a camel. We got in and made it to our hotel.

Karachi was quite a culture shock for me. Men walk arm in arm, or hand in hand, and women might as well be nonexistent for all you see of them! 95% of women have their faces hidden behind veils. They walk around in groups, and avert their eyes rather than looking directly at you.

None of the toilets were equipped with toilet paper. I know! I looked for it! I finally found some on the black market.

-3-

We were scheduled to wrestle two days after we got there. We didn't wrestle for three weeks.

We took walks. Walking along open-air sewers was not very exciting or appetizing, so we didn't do that too often. It was stifling hot and dusty, and I got prickly heat rash.

It was so bad that I got to the point where I could not walk, sit or lie down without pain. It was raw all under my arms and between my thighs where they rubbed together. I tried everything in the market to remedy it.

One day, as King Kong held court on the lawn of the hotel, while one servant awaited orders and the other stood behind him fanning him, he saw me gingerly walking out of the hotel. I was taking small steps so my rash would not hurt so much. King Kong called me over.

I told him "I'm sorry I can't sit on the ground below you, it hurts too much."

He let out with a bellow, "Oh my God, Paul! That's not for you! That's for these imbeciles! You have to dominate these people or they don't respect you!

"The only thing that would get rid of your prickly heat rash is turpentine.

I looked at him like I thought he was joking.

He was not.

I said “Emil, I’ve got it everywhere you can see, and places you can’t see. Everywhere!”

He said, “I know. Believe me, I’ve suffered with it myself.

“The turpentine hurts a little but it will cure you.”

I got a gallon of turpentine from the hotel paint shop. I took it to my room, and poured it in the bidet that was in the bathroom. I figured I would do the parts that hurt and were most raw first.

So I sat in it.

Whereupon I let out a big yell and jumped up. For the first time in my life I thought I was going to die!

I remember running around hollering, and trying to fan myself. I noticed the ceiling fan turning. I asked myself how I could get my ass up there.

I pulled my bed under the fan, but it was still too low for it to do any good. I picked up my bureau, a big tall, Victorian-style thing. I put it on the bed and climbed up on it on all fours. I stuck my ass up as high as I could.

After I got down, I figured I might as well go all the way and rub some on the rest of my body. After all, it couldn’t hurt that much anymore. I was right.

As I was finishing, my fellow wrestler Kangaroo Kennedy came in, and looked at my bed in the middle-of-the-room with the Bureau on top of it.

He said “Hey mate, you rearranging the furniture? You redecorating? Is that paint I smell?”

I told him what I had done. As we sat there laughing, I realized my ass was not burning anymore.

And I have never had prickly heat rash since then!

When I first went to Asia in 1963, I stayed at the only hotel in Karachi, Pakistan that was a suitable place for world travelers.

While I was waiting for my first match, I had a lot of time on my hands. At night, the big 200 seat dining room would convert itself into a nightclub, and showplace. So that became a hangout, and I would get up and sing with the band. Many of the band members, and many of the patrons, were expatriates like me. They liked my singing and I liked doing it.

After about a month, the local promoter decided to move our headquarters to the town of Lahore, in northern Pakistan. Our hotel there was associated with the one in Karachi. Both hotels were called the Park Beach Hotel, despite the fact that neither of them were near a beach.

When I got there, the grand ballroom had just reopened after extensive renovations. The nightclub act that was planned was a husband and wife Flamenco dancing team from Spain. The official grand reopening was to coincide with a local by the Duke Ellington Orchestra, which was on a US State Department-sponsored world tour, and would be staying at the Park Beach Hotel.

As in Karachi, I would sing every night in the nightclub. With the grand reopening approaching, a telegram arrived telling the hotel manager that the Flamenco dancers would be a week late. Despondent, he told me that he would have to cancel the grand opening. I told him I would be willing to sing as the main act until the grand opening.

He told me he would pay me, but I said that my bar bill and a nice handmade baggy sleeved red shirt for my appearances would be adequate pay.

The manager ran an ad in the paper, using one of my wrestling poses. It read “You have seen him wrestle, now come and watch him and thrill at the sound of his golden voice.”

The nightclub was packed every night for a week.

The first night I saw a distinguished looking gentleman sitting by himself. He seemed particularly attentive to the songs that I sang in French. After the show, he offered to buy me a drink if I would sit with him and speak French. He had gotten his education at the Sorbonne in Paris, but now rarely had the opportunity to speak French.

He told me he would be back the next night with friends. The following day, an employee at the hotel told me that I had been talking with Chief Justice of the Pakistani Supreme Court.

That night I went to see a great Duke Ellington concert. I hurried back to the hotel to do my show and when I started, I noticed an empty table in front with a reserved sign on it. In the middle of my third or fourth song before the full house, I saw a loud and rambunctious group come in and sit at the reserved table.

Actually, one of them was not loud, but rather quiet and reserved. He had great big bags under his eyes, and as I looked at him, I realized it was Duke Ellington.

I'm sure he knew that he was hearing an amateur singer, but he was trying to show the professional courtesy of listening in silence. The other people at

the table turned out to be big wigs in the Pakistani military, and they never shut up.

As I was finishing La Vie En Rose, the Duke stood up, looked straight at me with both hands palms up, pointed at his companions and mouthed ”I'm sorry,” and left.

After the show, three black guys I recognized from the Duke Ellington band asked if they could get up and jam, which they proceeded to do until four in the morning.

It was a memorable night for me, both as aspiring onstage performer and inspired audience member.

-5-

While I was in India, I was in several movies with the great wrestler and movie star Dara Singh. He had become one of the busiest actors in India, making adventure movies in Tarzan roles, gladiator roles, and the like.

He was more than happy to have me play villain roles opposite him, for they had trouble finding suitable villains in the local casting places. He was such a big hero that I wound up acting in five movies while I was there and, as the villain, getting killed in all of them.

One in particular sticks in my mind; it was titled Rustom-E-Rome. I was invited to the premier by Dara Singh and the producers. That was quite an experience. The premier was held in an overflowing cinema that had a seating capacity of 1000, but was packed with maybe 2000. There were people everywhere, some two to a seat, and some on laps. The aisles were filled with moviegoers.

To make matters worse, at least from my point of view, they introduced the stars of the movie that were present. The master of ceremonies introduced me as that arch villain from Canada, Paul Vachon.

As much as they had been cheering the other stars, they started hissing at me and calling insults up to my balcony seat. Every time I appeared on the screen, the hissing and insults repeated themselves. It was as if the audience could not separate what was happening in the movie and real-life.

Very reminiscent of what happens at a wrestling match.

Indian people take their movies very seriously. Even though I got killed by Dara Singh in the movie, the mob scene I faced as I left the theater was like a nightmare. They tried to kill me again, as if, to them, I should've stayed dead. I was escorted to the vehicle I was riding home in by security guards. Then the guards left, and that's when they started hitting the car and rocking it back and forth, trying to turn it over.

Just as I was thinking I was a goner, Dara Singh came out. They all shifted their attention to him and we were able to get away.

Needless to say, I never went to another movie premiere again, at least not in India.

-6-

A few years later, I did accompany my friend Tosh Togo to the premiere of "Goldfinger" in Paris, France. I had been wrestling in France when I saw my friend Tosh in the Paris wrestling office.

Tosh said “Hey, Paul, brother, am I ever glad to see you! I’ve been in France for today’s opening of the James Bond movie ‘Goldfinger’, in which I play a character called Odd Job. I haven’t found anybody that speaks English here. You speak English and French, can you come with me? Please, brother?”

Tosh was a Hawaiian and a real nice guy, friendly like all Hawaiians. I had a real good time with him for a couple of days. Unlike the premiere of my movie in Bombay, when the people came out and saw him standing there in the lobby alive and well, although he had been killed in the movie, they did not try to kill him as the Indians had tried to kill me in Bombay.

For centuries, wrestling has been the Pakistani national sport. Maharajahs had stables of wrestlers who would compete in great tournaments.

I wrestled in a tournament against the latest of that breed. Six brothers, whose father had been world champion, had never been beaten by a foreign wrestler.

Of course, they almost never wrestled foreigners.

55,000 people showed up to see the foreign devils, of which I was one, get soundly defeated.

As I came down the tunnel toward a ring lit by just one bulb, it was approaching one o'clock in the morning.

I could not see the people, because they were all in the dark (the wrestlers were the only ones to be seen under that one ring light), but I felt their presence in my bones, felt their excitement, and it only added to my own excitement and to the goose bumps that I was feeling.

In addition to all the excitement, Kangaroo Kennedy and I had been drinking a lot of tea while we were waiting. We both needed to pee, so we walked about 100 steps out of the range of the light bulb that lit the ring. There we stood in the dark peeing and watching the wrestling match.

Suddenly, from behind us, came a great roar. That was when we realized we had been peeing in front of the giant crowd that was sitting in the darkness.

When I got into the ring, all the foreign devils preceding me had lost to the local legends. However, once the last brother got into the ring, he got all flustered and forgot his normal style of wrestling.

He tried to kick me in the family jewels.

He missed.

I dropped to my knees anyway. I got on all fours. When he thought he had connected with my testicles, he jumped on top of me from the front and circled my body with his arms.

I locked his arms in with mine, and got up off my knees. He was now on top, but he was locked in.

King Kong, acting as an invited special referee for the main event, hated all Indian and Pakistani wrestlers.

He had a first-hand view of what was going on. He said to me in his gruff voice "Suplex the bastard!"

I did. I could not resist it.

Up he went. His feet almost hit the low-hanging ring light. His head came down onto the mat. With my 280 pounds on top of him, I knocked him out cold.

King Kong said “That’ll teach the bastard.”

King Kong had to count him out. Knowing that this was going to be a problem, King Kong counted “One, two, three, get up you bastard, four, five, six, get up you bastard, seven, eight, get up you bastard!”

But it was to no avail. He was really out.

“Nine, ten!”

When it dawned on the Pakistani crowd that one of their heroes had been beaten by a foreign devil, they poured out of their seats all once.

I looked at King Kong and asked him “What are we going to do?”

He said “Don’t ask me, you suplexed him!”

I said “You told me to!”

I thought I was a goner. I remember thinking “Where is Mad Dog when you need him?”

Just when all seemed lost, I saw the security forces on horseback. They were bearing the long sticks they use to quell riots and control crowds.

I saw the soldiers swing them and heard “Whack! Whack!”

The crowd dispersed. A few of them got into the ring, but the other wrestlers and I cleaned them up in no time.

Later that night, we got back to the hotel rooms to find they been ransacked.

So that the natives could regain their honor, the promoter arranged for me to wrestle an even bigger and stronger brother.

That match drew 85,000 people, the largest crowd in professional wrestling history up to that date.

I provided the bigger brother with an easy victory, so I lived to tell about it! King Kong was not very happy about that, but I figured that it was my life, and I had already been paid for that week. It was the same $300 a week, no matter how many times you wrestled or even if you didn't.

I'd wrestled twice that week. That seemed like enough.

-9-

At one point, I was traveling back and forth for matches in Pakistan and India. One time I arrived at the airport in Dacca to find the airport under siege by thousands of Indian refugees, all attempting to fly on the one flight out of Dacca to Calcutta. There were people camped all around the airport waiting for a seat on the plane.

The refugee problem had been created by the recent border clashes between India and Pakistan. My reservation on the one flight out of out of the country was long gone. At the airport, they told me it would be weeks before I could get out.

I produced some money for a bribe. One guy told me that for that much money he could get me out in *two* weeks. Everybody at the airport was offering to pay to get out. That's the way it worked in that part of the world.

I found a map of the country at the library and figured I was about 70 to 80 miles from the Indian border. I took a motorized rickshaw. We traveled the best part of the day, over roads that were only meant for animal traffic. The driver was happy for the all-day job.

But no matter how much money I offered, he would not get closer than about 5 miles to the border. I walked the last 5 miles.

I saw why the driver would not go any further. I saw people dead on the side of the road, some of them with their throats slit and some even worse.

I made it to the Indian border without anything bad happening to me. My Canadian passport once again was a great blessing. They let me walk across

the border, and I boarded the train to Calcutta.

Chapter 6

Some of the women in my life

-1-

As a young man, I worked as a bouncer at a club in Montreal called the Bacardi. For a while, I went back to Richford. It was during one of those visits home that my father made the connection for me to the traveling wrestling promoter Van Fleet. When my first appearance in the ring for him didn't get me an immediate job traveling with his crew, I went back to the Bacardi as a bouncer.

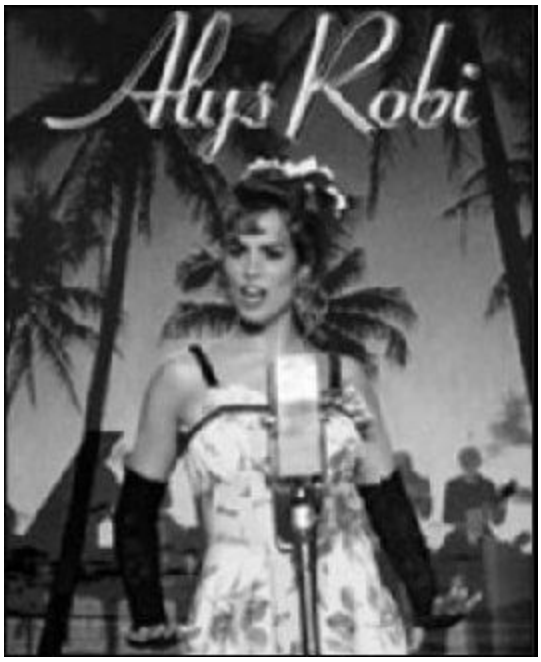
One night, about one in the morning, I met someone who was to influence me as a man. You might say that she helped me become a man.

I was a farm boy, and had learned about the birds and the bees at an early age. I did not go to high school or date on a regular basis, so I was a little naïve. I'd been busy wrestling as an amateur, training, getting into riots around the professional wrestling ring, and, at this point, I had three pro matches under my belt.

I'd done all those things, but had no real sex, other than the self-gratifying kind that most teenagers of my time experimented with.

The meeting that helped me find my way to my manhood was with a woman 15 years my senior. I walked into the upstairs nightclub, and saw my boss talking to a woman who was standing at the end of the bar.

I recognized her as Alys Robi, a very famous and popular singer at that time. She was probably the most famous, and best, singer in Montréal, if not the whole country. He introduced us, saying to her that, "This young man is a bouncer upstairs at the new nightclub."



Everybody knew who she was, so he didn't mention her name to me. She said, smiling with that famous smile, "You don't look old enough to be a customer upstairs, much less a bouncer."

I said, "You're right on one count. You have to be 21 to be a customer upstairs, but only 18 to be an employee, and that's what I am, 18."

At that, her smile got broader, and her brown eyes started to shine. She giggled and laughed in the most enticing way. I was to become familiar with that laugh, for she became part of that bridge that took me from adolescence to manhood.

She had been there that night to talk to my boss about singing at the Bacardi in the near future. They had been discussing her salary, which was very high, and the starting date.

But when she was introduced to me, and found out my age, my name, and the fact that I was working upstairs, she turned around and said to my boss, "I'll take the money you offered, although it's very little for me, but I'll sing upstairs and start tomorrow."

That was the start of my real sex education. What an education it was! It was a relationship that I would wish every young man that's about to

embark on their manhood should have. I don't want to go into too many intimate details, but the next two years were like a roller coaster ride, full of ups and downs, sometimes as many as five times a day, with all the trimmings in between.

I've read somewhere that a man reaches sexual peak at 18 and a woman at 35. You might say we climbed that mountain and peaked together. It seems she could not get enough of that climbing. I would wake up out of a deep slumber, dreaming that something was happening to me, and sure enough, something was! She would be working in the most enchanting way on my part of the peak.

Alys Robi's life story is a fascinating one, which is why there have been books, plays, a TV series and a 2004 movie about her. Like Celine Dion, she was a child star, first performing on stage at age 7. In her late twenties, she was in a car accident on her way to a shot at fame in Hollywood. The accident and its injuries left her depressed. Her father committed her to an asylum, where she remained for five years. At the end of that stay, she was given a lobotomy against her wishes.

While lobotomies done at the time often produced individuals of greatly reduced function, hers was a complete success. Credit was due to surgeon Wilder Penfield, whose pioneering work mapped the regions of the brain.

She was an international star, as she translated songs from Portuguese and Spanish. Her singing career continued after her recovery from hospitalization.

She staged a comeback in the Nineties, and her work from then and earlier can be seen on the website www.philrobinson.blogspot.com. For obvious reasons, she often drew comparison to Judy Garland. When you view her performances on that website, you can see similarities in their stage presence.

Due to the public awareness of her mental health issues, she was probably very concerned with appearances. Therefore, in order to legitimize our relationship, she hired me as a bodyguard.

It was only a front. You might say my pay was in trade, or lessons. So, at 18, I had three jobs going; one was as a bouncer, the second was as a bodyguard, and the only one that was really important to me was as a wrestler.

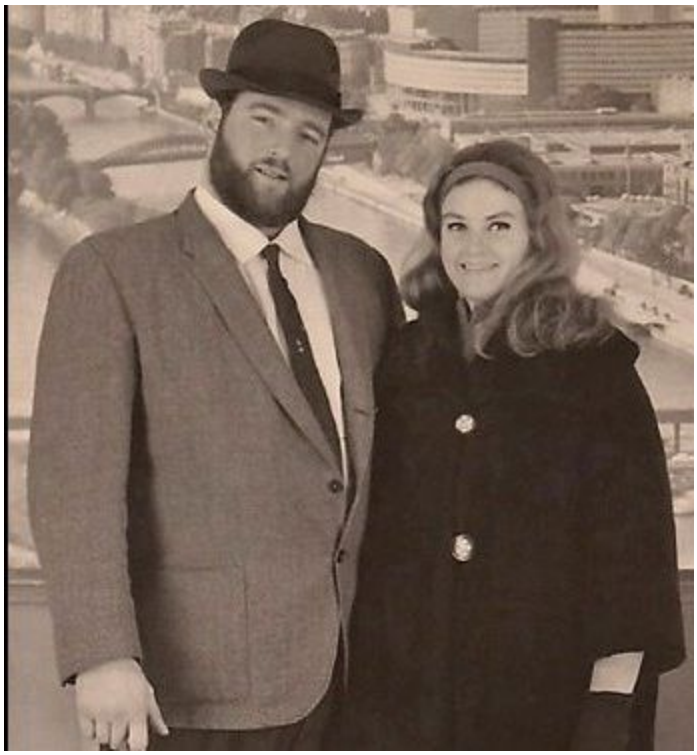
Alys died in 2011, at age 88. I will always be grateful for all I learned from her.

-2-

While wrestling in Western Canada, I met a girl in Calgary, and married her. Donna had been raised on a farm like me. She competed in beauty contests, and had been crowned Miss Central Alberta. She was a beautiful, blue-eyed, blonde girl who was very athletic, and a long-distance swimmer. She was quite happy at the prospect of getting away from the farm and traveling.

However, after six years of traveling with me, to 10 different countries, and having children in three of them, she had had enough, and she left me. We parted friends. She had had enough of the gypsy's life and she wanted to have our children in just one school for more than six months.

Donna put her foot down because she wanted to settle down somewhere. She did admit that she had one hell of a ride in the time we were together.



She made a couple of movies in India and was offered a long-term contract by a large studio in Bombay. She had also been the first female wrestler to perform in Asia. Donna served as a hostess and greeter at the Playboy Club in Sydney Australia. She traveled around the world, and that for any sane person was enough!

I've always said that you have to be a little bit nuts to be in the wrestling business; I guess she wasn't nuts enough. Years later, she died in her sleep, of an internal hemorrhage, at the age of 57. She died in her beloved central Alberta.

While I was in India with Donna and my kids, King Kong enlisted my help in starting lady wrestling there. He could've gotten a couple of pros from Europe, but they were expensive.

He said to me, "Your job will be to find a couple of local girls here in Bombay, and train them to be wrestlers."

I was not as optimistic as he was, because I didn't think getting local Indian women to do this was possible.

King Kong said "There are 5 million people in Bombay. Half of them are female, and you can find two or three that will do it with the promise of fame and fortune."

For the next few days, I scoured the local bazaar. Clearly, the local girls did not have it in them to be wrestlers. They had never even heard of lady wrestlers.

However, I spotted, coming out of a Volkswagen minibus with German plates, a tall guy with a beard, accompanied by two equally tall women: one blonde, one brunette. The blonde was his girlfriend from Switzerland; the brunette was his sister from Germany.

The first lady wrestling matches ever in India were booked for a month after the day that I started teaching these two Amazons how to wrestle.

King Kong had rented some feather mattresses, something like a dozen of them. I remember them being delivered by 12 bearers, one mattress on each of their heads. The hotel management would not let them go up to the roof on the elevator. They walked up the eight floors, all 12 of them, in a conga line.

Once they were on the roof, we covered the mattresses with a tarp and, presto, we had a ring. No ropes, of course, but still something I could put the girls through their paces on. At least, I had to teach them how to fall without breaking their neck.

My wife Donna had been in the hospital, having delivered our son Andre 24 hours earlier. She did not want to stay there any longer; she described the woman doctor that had helped with the delivery as a horse doctor. She had been forced to deliver without local anesthetic. After the delivery, the doctor had sewed her up without anesthesia. She brought the baby home, and came up to the roof to watch me training the girls.

Although these girls were nice and trim, they were not especially athletic. The blonde one was especially awkward, as if she had two left feet.

Although Donna had never wrestled before, she knew she could do better. She was chomping at the bit to get in there. She was not going to go back to the hospital for any reason. She asked me to take her stitches out, which I did.

She got on the mat with me and the girls, and I taught her how to wrestle, in two weeks. She was good enough to wrestle anywhere in the world. It helped that she had always been athletic, a long-distance swimmer and had even trained as a Scottish dancer. She had competed in the Highland games and could do the Highland fling with the best of them.

King Kong imported two professional French girls. They came to Bombay about a week before the match, so that we could have a couple of training sessions with them and my new wrestlers. The two professionals were not that impressed by the new girls, but Donna Black did very well, considering that she just had a baby two weeks before.

The girls from France were happy with the location of the training facilities; it was outside, and on the roof, so, after the workout, they decided to do a little sunbathing. Off went their tops. I could understand why one of them wanted a tan; she was rather pale. But the other one was a black woman and certainly did not need any more color.

The German girl and the Swiss girl were not to be outdone, and they also bared their chests. When that happened, I sort of said, “Well, I got something to do at home. However, just then, the elevator came up and out came Donna Black. She took one look at the four bare-chested girls, then looked at me, and said, “What’s going on here?”

I said, “Sunbathing.”

She said “Cool, just like on the beach in Australia,” and she took her shirt off, too!

I said, “Well, I must go.”

As I started to leave, King Kong came out of the elevator.

He took one look at the five bare-chested women tanning in the sun on the roof and his jaw dropped. He said, “My God, Paul, what are they doing?”

I said, “They are sunbathing, Emile. After all, this is the Sea Face Hotel, and we are across the street from the ocean.”

Outraged, he said, “They can’t do that here, maybe on the beach in France they can, but not here in India. My God, if word gets around, they will cause a riot, and we will all be thrown out of the country. You see to it that they get dressed!”

He turned around and headed back toward the elevator. I said, “Emile, where are you going?”

He said “I’m going to my room to get my heart medicine. When I come back I don’t want to see anybody bare-chested, unless it’s you, Paul!”

The night of the big show, I was made special referee for the matches. In the first match, the black girl, who was supposedly a professional, was so turned off by the German girl’s lack of experience that she forgot everything she ever knew.

I calmed her down a bit in French and told her to grab a headlock on the green German girl. In English, I told the German girl to try, as hard as she could, to get out. That made it look like a real catfight. The German girl in the headlock kept refusing to give up. Finally, I rang the bell, and raised the black girl’s arm and we were done with the first match.

The second match of the card was between the white French girl and Donna Black, the Canadian champ. After her two weeks of wrestling, we had promoted her to champion.

King Kong said she was the best one of the bunch. She was a natural. He liked her so much, he said that if ever there were a next time, he would hire her instead of me. I figured that was because he had seen her chest.

In Bombay India, there is, at ringside, as the wrestling is going on, a play-by-play announcer, who tells the people what is going on in the ring, as if the whole crowd was made up of blind people.

To make sure we had a little bit of heat and interest in the crowd, I, as the referee, started to show a little bias towards the Canadian girl. For example,

I would flinch when she got hit and, one time, I caught her as she was falling, helping her to get up.

The commentator started to mention that to the crowd, and, after a while, he just happened to mention that Donna Black's married name was Vachon. That's when it finally dawned on those people that she was my wife and they remembered what a dirty villain I had been in previous weeks when I wrestled their hero, the great Dara Singh.

Now the crowd turned on Donna Black, and the French girl had all the support and sympathy of the crowd. After that, the match was easy, and a good match, too. After a while, the French girl could not take any more of my cheating, so she grabbed me by the beard, and, with the crowd egging her on, she threw me over the top rope, much to the crowd's delight. I had no choice but to disqualify her. I rang the bell and gave the match to Donna Black.

So the Canadian champion was undefeated on her tour of India.

-4-

My marriage to Donna started to unravel while I was wrestling in England. The beauty queen from the farm had been tickled pink to marry me, see the world, and be seen by the world.

Donna was now longing for things like steady friends, or maybe a school that the kids could attend for more than three months at a time. As long as the boys were small, and not in school yet, and she could be a playboy bunny hostess in Sydney Australia, or the famous lady wrestler in India, she was happy with life on the road.

But when she got to be tied down at home to take care of our family, she then felt cheated, because I did not live by those rules.

Looking back in those days, I regret that the boys didn't get more of family life. Life on the road as a professional wrestler is not conducive to family life. In fact, they don't go together at all.

-5-

One night in England, I was driving back from a wrestling match, when a classic English fog settled in. I called my wife and told Donna I thought the fog was too heavy for me to continue driving, and that I wouldn't be home that night. I told her I would just sleep in the car.

She said "As long as you're back by tomorrow, since it's Valentine's Day."

However, the fog lifted, and I was able to go home that night. When I got home, Donna had a nice negligee on, candles burning, and a Valentine card on the table. After a while, I figured out that, since I was not supposed to be home, that this was not for me.

The doorbell rang, and there was a mutual friend, Frank the friendly mechanic, holding a bottle of wine and a giant Valentine's Day card, with a surprised shit-eating grin on his face. I punched him in the nose, and he fell back three or four steps into the street.

He was still hanging onto the Valentine card, so I grabbed it, and tore it into four pieces, and threw them on the ground. All Frank said was that I had it coming. My wife came out and used Frank's car to take him to the hospital. I had, with one punch, broken his jaw and pushed his nose into his head.

When they left the hospital, Donna took him to his house, but his wife didn't want him, so they couldn't stay there. They came back to our place, but I wouldn't let them stay. Donna begged me to let them stay because he was in bad shape, but I could not find it in my heart to let them.

I threw the mother of my children out. I took the boys to a friend's house, where he and his wife welcomed them with open arms. I was looking for someone to take care of them while I went to wrestle. We stayed with them for the remainder of our time in the British Isles.

When I returned from England to wrestle in the United States, Donna and I decided to try again. However, it wasn't too long before she left me again, and, can you believe this, for another mechanic named Frank.

When I returned to the United States with Donna and the kids, I started wrestling in Kansas City. However, the opportunity soon arose to wrestle in

Atlanta. We were living in a 70 x 14’ wide mobile home with Donna and the boys, Marc, Pierre, and Andre, and we had a live-in nanny named Ruthanne.

Ruthanne was a 21-year-old hillbilly girl from the Ozark Mountains, very pretty, and with a friendly smile. She loved the boys and they loved her; she was always around to take care of them, which was not so for Donna or me.

It was common knowledge that Donna was infatuated with another mechanic named Frank. I’m thinking that Donna’s mother, who was at the time living with some guy named Frank, had probably inspired her. Anyway, Donna had taken Ruthanne under her wing, you might say, and pretended to be overprotecting her.

She would say things like, “We can’t let her out of our sight.” When the kids were all in bed, Donna would get Ruthanne, and say something like “you hillbilly girls can’t be trusted not to run off at night, so you better sleep right here between Paul and me.”

Ruthanne would smile a great big smile, and secretly, so would I.

That night I went home and told Donna that we were moving the whole family to Atlanta. She said, “I ain’t going, and neither are the boys.” Up until then, it had been a balancing act keeping the family together, with neither one of us wanting to be the one responsible for the breakup, particularly in the eyes of the boys.

We were still sleeping three to a bed, and that night, Ruth was rather clinging to me. The next morning, after my wife got up and left the bed, Ruthanne said, “I’ll go with you and the boys.”

We found an old 1958 Dodge that someone sold us for $300. I remember it was a pushbutton automatic transmission, which I thought was cool, man, cool. However, it was not a car you could really make a fast getaway in, because, before you could take off, you had to pop the hood and short the celluloid switch with a screwdriver. But at least we had a way to escape.

Donna was too busy carrying on with her own social life, so she never noticed the preparations for us to go. About a week later, we did. We loaded

up the boys, who were six, four, and two years old, their clothes and ours, and headed off. We slept in the car, and the next day we were in Atlanta.

The move to Atlanta improved our money situation right away. Ruthanne was devoted to the boys, and we had a furnished apartment.

We had contacted Donna, their real mother, two days after we left Kansas City. She said she had gotten a job as a hostess in a Kansas City nightclub, and didn't realize that we had left town. She had just figured that the boys and Ruthanne had gone on the road with me to do a couple of towns.

Ruthanne stayed with us for a full year before she asked if she could go to visit her mother in the Ozark Mountains, back in Missouri. While she was there, her mother talked her out of coming back, telling her that was no future in this situation for her; me, a 30 year old married man with three boys, and her, 21 years old.

Ruthanne called me in tears to tell me. Although I could see her mother's point of view, at the time I didn't think was any of her business. Eventually, I would've done the wedding thing. I was devastated, not because there was a shortage of women around, but all of us had grown fond of our girl from the Ozarks.

In a few days, I broke down and called Donna in Kansas City, and asked her to come and get the boys. I told her I would pay all expenses and all child support. She said to send her the ticket and she would be down.

That night, I got onto another phone call from Ruthanne. She was all teared up and wanted bus money to come back. For $35, she could take a bus, and be in Birmingham, Alabama the very next night. She could be there about 11 PM and, it being Saturday, after doing television in the afternoon, I could probably get to Birmingham by midnight.

When I got to Birmingham, Ruthanne had changed her mind again, and was not there. It was a sad moment, but it passed. Happiness belongs to those who can take adversity in stride. Who knows what kind of life we might've had together, but I can't say that I regret the life that I've had without her.

The next day was Sunday, and Donna showed up, and took over their upbringing, as if she had never stopped. She stayed around for a few days until we could make traveling arrangements for her and the boys to get back to Kansas City.

Although we had spent much time apart while I was wrestling, I had a bad feeling about letting the boys go without me, a feeling that I would never see them again. I did see them again, but I was never around long enough to bring them up. I must say their mother did a pretty good job with them.

They left in the old Dodge. I gave them all the money I had on me, three or four hundred dollars, and my Texaco credit card. Donna said she was just going to use it for gas, and when she got to Kansas City, she would send it right back to me.

This is not a book on advice to people who are splitting up, but this I can say with conviction, “Don’t ever give your credit card away to the leaving spouse, no matter how amicable parting is.”

All I ever got back from that credit card was bills, bills, and more bills. My second wife, Van, who took care of all the bookkeeping in my second marriage, sent Texaco money for couple of years.

Finally, one day, she asked me, “Where is that Texaco credit card of yours that I send money to? I’ve never seen you use it.”

I was dumbfounded, because I had completely forgotten about it. Needless to say, it was finally cancelled, but, by then, I had paid for it for a long time. Van did not want to hurt our credit card rating by not paying.

Years later, I went to visit the boys in Seattle. I saw that old Dodge abandoned in the vacant lot next to their house. It had taken them all the way there. I went to talk to it, and said that it was too bad that it was so lonely.

The car said not to worry, because the boys still came to play.

Well, maybe I didn’t hear that, but that’s what I saw.

In 1967, I married my second wife, Van. She was my soul mate for many years. We shared many good times and did many things together. She was the wind beneath my wings. When I started Grand Prix Wrestling, one of the most successful wrestling promotions ever in Canada, she was the one that made it work. She got producer credits on wrestling programs, variety shows, roller derby games, and countless other programs.

Chapter 7

On Top in the States

-1-

In the summer of 1955, at the tender age of 17 ½ years old, I was fresh from earning a silver medal at the Canadian amateur championship in Regina, Saskatchewan.

My brother Mad Dog had decided that I would never make any money wrestling as an amateur, so he brought me with him to Larry Kazabosky's territory in North Bay, Ontario.

Larry's territory was strictly a summer territory, and it was a so-called Junior Heavyweight territory. As such, it had been twinned up with another Junior Heavyweight territory in West Texas, called the Amarillo territory.

The Texas territory was run then by Doc Sarpolis. These two different territories, separated by at least 2000 miles, would use pretty much the same men.

Those men and their families were really like gypsies. In summer, they would be in northern Ontario. In winter, they would travel to the southern state of Texas, to West Texas.

Dory Funk (now known as Dory Funk, senior) was one of those men. He was from Amarillo. Maurice, my older brother (eight years older than me) was another one. He was, of course, from Canada.

In North Bay lived a couple of brothers by the name of Parks. They were part of the migrant worker class described above. They also owned and operated, in the summer, two sets of holiday log cabins built side-by-side, with maybe two dozen log cabins between them.

These log cabins were called Sunset Park cottages, not because their owner's name was Parks, but because they were situated on Sunset Park Beach, on the shores of beautiful Lake Nipissing in northern Ontario.

Every summer, half a dozen of these light housekeeping cabins were populated with wrestlers and their families. In the summer of 1955, one was occupied by Mad Dog, another wrestler from Montréal, Bob Marion (a.k.a. Pat O'Brien), and me.

Our neighbors were none other than the Funk family: Dory senior, his wife, and their two noisy, playful, rambunctious and loud brats.

Dory Junior and Terry were running around, going in and out of the water all day, every day, keeping everybody else on alert, even those of us who

had traveled all night coming back from faraway wrestling matches and were trying to sleep in.

Mad Dog was especially grouchy when he didn't get enough sleep and you would think he would cuss at them, but no, he would cuss at me.

He would say "Paul, it's your job to keep those kids quiet."

These of course are all fond memories of that summer when I had my first real professional wrestling match. I was 6 foot one, weighing one hundred ninety pounds and just out of the amateur years that had culminated at the Canadian Championship.

Up until then I had taken part in lots of amateur bouts for four or five years, and never had suffered from stage fright. But that's exactly what happened to me the night of my first pro match.

In order to have me break into the wrestling business, Larry Kazabosky and my brother Maurice had come up with the idea of me interfering in the match between Maurice and Dory Funk, senior.

Then Tony Marelli, an old-time wrestler who had been on the card in the preliminaries, came up to the ring and told referee Joe Dempsey of my interference.

Before a riot could start, promoter Larry Kazabosky jumped into the ring and said "The only way we will settle this dispute will be to have a two-against-two Australian tag team match, winners take all.

"We will have this match here, next week, at the Memorial Auditorium."

Then, the next week, the night of the Australian tag team match (I don't know the reason why, but in those days, 55 years ago, all tag matches were called Australian tag team matches. Perhaps I should ask the Encyclopedia of wrestling, my friend, J. Michael Kenyon, about that. I will as soon as I get the chance.)

Anyway, the night of my first pro match, when I walked up onto the apron of the ring, I froze, unable to go any further. I was having a panic attack; I was petrified. Really out-and-out petrified.

My teeth were chattering, my palms sweating, my knees shaking. It was terrible, so terrible that 55 years later I remember it well.

Maurice had always been a conditioning fanatic and in tip-top shape, and could have beaten those two guys all right by himself, but that would not have served the purpose.

The goal was to have his little brother Paul break into the wrestling business. Boy, was he mad, but, grudgingly, he started the match.

After 5 minutes of wrestling he tried to tag me, but I could not go in. I was still scared stiff.

After 20 minutes of wrestling, trying to tag me in and failing, he came to our corner raging mad, frothing at the mouth, and hissing at me.

He said “If you don’t come into this ring this minute, you are going back to the farm tomorrow and you will be milking cows and shoveling manure the rest of your life.”

Then he growled at me “Get into this damn ring, now,” and that is the way he got me into the ring.

I was still scared. Scared of the ring, mind you, but I was more scared of Mad Dog.

Maurice didn’t get the name of Mad Dog until many years after that, but that’s what it looked like to me that day in North Bay, Ontario.

Maurice had never hit me, his brother, in anger before (and he still has not.)

So I got into the ring…… and stood there frozen.

Of course, our opponents, the old pros, knew exactly what was going on, so tough old Tony Marelli started circling around and around me, and talking to me under his breath.

Now, before I go any further with this story, I want to tell you a few words about tough Tony Marelli. He, in his younger days, had wrestled amateur himself, and was very good at it.

He knew about my recent Canadian championship silver medal, and said to me, without moving his lips (much like a ventriloquist) “kid, leg dive me.”

But, still, I could not move. So he came back and said to me “Ah, come on, kid, you don’t want to go back to the farm and shovel manure. Come on, leg dive me.”

I did, and I am proud to say I have never had stage fright since.

-2-

My early experience in wrestling alternated with time spent as a bouncer and bodyguard. Those jobs put me in contact with the man who was then the agent of the wrestling midgets. I knew he also had an interest in the Detroit territory, and I was always bugging people to book me somewhere, anywhere.

So Jack Britton finally consented to book me in the Detroit territory for two weeks. He did this to get me off his back more than anything else. When my two weeks were up, I begged his partner, Bert Ruby, to keep me.

He told me, “Paul, it’s like this. You are not a bad wrestler, someday you will be really good. But we can’t use you. You look too young, with your rosy cheeks, blue eyes, and blonde hair. People don’t believe in you. You look like a kid of 18. Come back in 10 years or so.”

When he said that, my heart sank.

It’s funny how things happen in life that seem completely unrelated to you, but affect you nevertheless.

After the two-week tryout in Detroit, I was back again at my bouncing job. At that time, the Russians launched the first-ever Earth orbiting satellite, Sputnik. It was believed that America had lost the space race. People actually thought the Russians were spying on them.

It was about that time that I, trying everything in the book to get back in the wrestling, called back Bert Ruby in Detroit. I said to him “You told me you couldn’t use me because I looked too young. How about if I grow a beard? That would make me look a bit older.”

He said “Yes, and shave your head; you come back and we will make a Russian out of you! There’s a big demand in the United States for Russian villains.”

I let my whiskers grow, and, within a month, I was ready to shave my head, and my girlfriend cut my hair off. With each golden lock of hair falling, she cried a little bit louder.

Not me. I thought, “This is the answer to my prayers. Russian? Frenchman? Turk? What did it matter to me?”

I was going to be a pro wrestler, and that’s all I wanted! I went back to Detroit, two months after the original engagement. The same people who cheered me as a clean-cut youth now booed me. They yelled things like “Go home you ugly, old, Russian bastard!”

I wore a big, long red robe, a Cossack hat, and did the Russian dance, with hands on hips and knees, high-stepping around the ring.

I was given the name Nicolai Zulotoff. Bert Ruby sent me out on loan to Ohio, West Virginia, Texas, and St. Louis. I really played the part of a Russian. I walked around in black knee boots, baggy black pants and jackets and I looked like what I thought a Cossack should look like.

I protected my gimmick at all times. I did not speak English in public. I ate raw onions and garlic in public. It helped keep the people away, as well as convinced onlookers that I was really a Russian.

After about a year, I went back to my old job as a bouncer. I had shaved my beard and grown my hair back. I was now 20, and I felt like a has-been. I had my bodyguard job to keep me busy and preoccupied. But it was not enough to keep me from thinking about wrestling. I dreamed of ways that I could better run our business for more security of employment, a pension, etc.

I hadn’t been clean-shaven for more than a month when Maurice came to see me at the Two Ducks nightclub. He did not want to go back to Texas to wrestle that year. A promoter in Western Canada wanted to use us, but was concerned that we should be proper and worthy adversaries. He thought a

couple of French-Canadian lumberjacks could do well wrestling against the locals.

I felt it was appropriate we should go west. Maurice had never grown a beard, and I had shaved mine off when I got out of the Russian business. The promoter wanted pictures right then, so he could do advance publicity.

We wound up in the theater district in Montréal, and found a theatrical costume supply place. They rented us lumberjack outfits: boots, pants, plaid shirts, everything. They also glued phony whiskers onto our faces.

We went across the street to a photo studio, had the pictures made, and sent them to the promoter. We went home and let our beards grow in the two months we had left before our starting date out West. That year we really made a name for ourselves as a tag team.

-3-

I have been awed, thrilled, and impressed at things I saw and did in the ring.

Things like walking into the ring at the most famous concert hall in the world, London's Royal Albert Hall. While I was wrestling in the main event in a charity affair sponsored by the British Royal family, the Duke of Edinburgh came and shook hands with us contestants, wished us well and good luck. That's when I said to myself, "Not too bad for a country boy raised on Vermont Highway 105."

-4-

Another great experience taken from one of the 6000 wrestling matches I had in my career was at a benefit show at the Cowansville, Québec penitentiary.

After a one-hour tag team match, partnering with Mad Dog, I was all tired out, really out of breath.

No wonder, for the past two years I had not been wrestling at all. I had been too busy being a promoter (the real villains of the wrestling business) and, at 340 pounds, was really, really out of shape.

However, Mad Dog had noticed that the convicts had been having such a good time, and were not really ready, or anxious, to go back to their cells, and were wanting more.

So, softhearted Mad Dog grabbed the microphone and said “I’ve got a surprise for you, my friends. My brother, Paul, is going to sing you a song.

Having said that, he handed me the mic. He left me, half-naked and out of breath, in the middle of the ring, in front of thousands of prisoners.

Talk about a captive audience.

So I’m trying, real quick, to think of what kind of song can you sing for an audience of that kind, especially when you’re out of breath, mind you.

In those days, my voice was still good enough to sing the high notes with Mario Lanza, and the low baritone ones, with Bing Crosby, but out of breath like I was, I couldn’t sing a note.

So I grabbed the mic and assured them that I was going to sing them a song.

They all cheered at that, but I told them before I did, I would like to tell them the real story of what this old folk song tells. While I was giving them a lesson on French Canadian history (like I’m going to give the reader right now), I was also getting my breath back.

I wasn’t sure at that point if a strange-behaving audience like this one would take to my story-telling (they had cheered the villains and booed the baby-faces and the referees).

They had even carried Frenchy Martin (a villain) on their shoulders to the ring, as they though he was one of them.

Sure enough, he had been, just a few short years before.

So I didn’t know how they would react, but I found out in a hurry. Much to my surprise and appreciation, they were so attentive. You could have heard a nun quietly saying her rosary.

This old folksong is titled in French “Un Canadien Errant”, which, in English, means a wandering Canadian.

I learned this tale in the third grade, in Canadian history class. This is the true story of the French settlers that had come from France, at the behest of the French explorer Samuel de Champlain, to help populate the land he had called Acadia. This area is now the provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. At the Battle of Québec, the British were victorious, and took over all of the French possessions in North America.

Because they didn't trust the French settlers to suddenly become loyal to the British Crown, they decided to expatriate them to exile, and it didn't matter where.

So, under the pretense of having a census, they ordered all of the French settlers, men, women, and children, to gather in their churches to be counted.

When they did, the British seized them, and separated them, putting women and children together.

The British loaded them all into ships with no rudders or sails, and took them all into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, in the Bay of Fundy.

They set them adrift, and they did the same with the men. Some of the leaders they grabbed as sailors on British ships and deported them to British colonies around the world. Some landed in New Zealand, some in Australia and New Guinea, some more in Africa.

Lots were never seen again, but the bulk of them that were set adrift were caught in the Gulf Stream and carried by it, all the way down the Eastern Seaboard, around the Floridian peninsula, into the Gulf of Mexico.

They finally got shipwrecked in what is now Louisiana, and since they had called their former homeland Acadia, they called themselves Acadians, which quickly became Cadians for short.

They spoke French then, and they still do. The spelling of their ethnic name, Cadians, has now become Cajun.

Their language has taken some hold in English tongues.

But this finds me, as a French Canadian, speaking and understanding the same language as our people did two or three hundred years ago. I could speak with them.

Now, the song that I finally sang to those prisoners tells the story of one of those men that had been taken by the British across the world, and put ashore.

Now, I had been debating in my mind, whether, in a book like this, written in English, it would seem out of context for me to translate from French to English.

But, if the reader is to know why I got the reaction I did out of the convicts I sang it for, the reader has to know what I sang about. Sometimes my translating skills are pretty bad- I hope not too bad today.

Here goes.

In French, the words of this song say:

"A wandering Canadian, banished from his homeland, and, tearfully traveling the world, was one day sitting by the ocean, watching the outgoing tide, and he said to it these words,

'If you see my country,

My beautiful country,

Go tell my friends that I remembered them all.

'In those bygone days,

So full of promise,

They were taken away

From me and my homeland,

And I will never see them again.’”

That song always gives me goose bumps when I sing it, and it gives me goose bumps now, as I’m writing about it.

Is it any wonder that thousands of convicts, some of them in jail for life and who would never see their home again, had tears in their eyes when I finished my song?

It didn’t matter to them that these words were being uttered to them by a half-naked man, out of breath at that, with tears in his eyes.

It landed on the cover of a wrestling magazine and sold all over the world. It had been taken by Norman Keitser, who published it, I think, in Wrestling News.

Norman came all the way from Minnesota to do a report on Grand Prix wrestling. Norman was a friend of the Vachon family.

It also doesn’t matter that the words of that song were written in the 1700’s, because songs about longing for home always tug at your heart strings.

-5-

Every wrestler tries to have a hold for which they are famous.

Verne Gagne had the sleeper hold.

Killer Kowalski had the stomach claw. In the following picture, he demonstrates his “iron claw” grip for one of his female protégés in his wrestling school.

Without a ring and wrestling gear, it looks more like Killer and his bad hairpiece have ended up on Dancing with the Stars.

(Photo courtesy of Dr. Mike Lano)

The hold for which I was probably most famous was called the hangman.

When I wrestled in New Zealand, it was one of those places that could not draw a good crowd without foreign stars. TV was just then coming into the country. They could not televise matches yet, but a friend arranged for another wrestler and me to give a demonstration, live in the studio. We showed the viewers how to apply different holds, like the top wrist lock, step over toehold, and hammerlock.

My next match was in front of a packed house in Wellington. Although there were other matches, the people really came to see the international stars they had seen on TV.

The promoter said to me “Paul, you can do it you want, but you’re leaving, when this is the first decent crowd we have had in a long time. If you beat our local boy and leave, we are left with nothing to draw people with.”

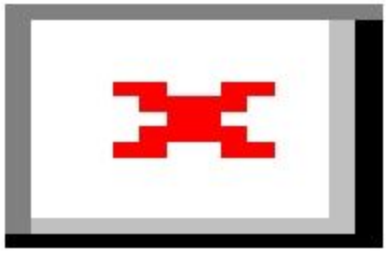
The wrestling matches consisted of 10 minute rounds. I figured that if, by some chance, we could go the distance to a draw it would make my opponent look at least as good as me. I had been beating everyone I wrestled for the past two months. If I lost, the New Zealand promoter would still have his drawing card.

80 minutes of pro wrestling is doable, if you pace yourself. My opponent was a young punk in the business. He was ready, willing, and able to do just about anything to get over with fans. In the first 40 minutes, he tried to do everything in the book except pace himself. I was just coasting along, keeping what reserves I had to allow me to go for 80 minutes.

By the time we had wrestled for an hour, my opponent was pooped. At my pace, I could last to the limit. It was easy for me because I was the general (the one who set the pace), and was running the show. But for him, he never knew what was coming. That made it harder for him. By the time we had wrestled 75 minutes, he could barely stand.

He said, “Take it, Paul, please take it.”

My finishing hold was the hangman. It goes this way; you come face-to-face with your opponent, bring his head down in front of you, grab him in a front face lock, turning all the time until he winds up back-to-back with you. He would be upside down and you would be right side up and stretching his neck. His feet are off the ground and, if he is smart, he would give up. That is why it's called finishing hold.



At the moment I got the hold on him, I heard him sigh with relief. I heard a sigh of resignation from the crowd. They thought it was all over.

But this time, instead of stretching his neck, I bent over, and he came right over my head, and landed on his feet in front of me. He looked at me, surprised and dumbfounded, and too pooped to do anything but stare.

I said "Small package, you fool."

He quickly rolled me up into a small ball, and the referee gave me a quick count, one, two, three!

Presto, New Zealand had its new drawing card.

-6-

Mad Dog paid for my return from England. When I saw him on the first day of my return from England, he said, "Enough of this globetrotting around the world for you. I have spoken to my friends Geigel and O'Connor here, and they will do their best to make you money. They asked what they should call you and since you were not here, and the fact is that I never

made big money until I was given the name Mad Dog, I told him we should give you an animal's name."

I figured he would say Paul the Fox, or Paul the Bull.

But he said, "I think we should call you Paul the Pig. What do you think about it?"

Well, right away, without really thinking about it, I said, "Fuck you, I'm not going to wrestle under the name Paul the Pig. Just think, Maurice, fans, instead of booing me, will oink and snort at me."

"So what?" he said. "They bark and howl at me because I'm called Mad Dog and they do so at packed houses everywhere I go."

So I barked at him, and he oinked and snorted at me. We looked at each other, and we both burst out laughing, proving that the Vachon brothers like to make money, but that they also could have fun, and laugh at each other.

Because of our French background, we finally decided to put something French and gory in the name, so for the first few shows in Kansas City, I was called The Butcher of Paris. I was glad to lose the "of Paris" part, since it made me sound like a war criminal. While I was supposed to be a bad guy, that would have gone against the good taste for which professional wrestling has always been known.

I think we made a good choice with the name Butcher, but thinking back, who could've forgotten a wrestler crazy enough to call himself Paul the Pig?

Shortly after I got to Kansas City, I almost died in a hotel fire. I was involved in a large party, with lots of people drinking and smoking. An unattended cigarette from one of the partygoers probably started the fire. Although, ultimately, no one was hurt, I vowed right then and there to quit drinking and smoking.

I was to drink 16 more years after that, before I finally quit. The same angel that saved me that day knows that I tried and could not. But that angel stuck with me until October 2, 1981. I was 44 then when I finally quit drinking.

-8-

When I returned to Kansas City to wrestle, I was really impressed with my chances of success. That was because one of the promoters there said, “Hey kid, on the big show in Kansas City, we are bringing in Dick Afflis from Chicago to wrestle with you in the semi -final. We think you are ready, do you?”

My jaw dropped, and I was speechless for a while and then I started to stutter. “You mean D-d-dick, the B-b-bruiser?”

He laughed and said, “Yes, none other.”

Dick the Bruiser had been one of my idols when I was growing up. I had seen him on Chicago television, and also at the Montréal Forum, which at the time was one of the Meccas of the worldwide wrestling business. I had been in the wrestling business as a pro for 10 years and I was about to learn a very important lesson that would last for the rest of my life. I was wondering what good a match with a star of that magnitude would do for my rising career. I was thinking that if I lost, everybody in the world would hear about it. I could not picture, at that time, my hand raised, not for a minute.

On the night of the big show in Kansas City, this is how I was introduced to Dick the Bruiser: promoter Bob Geigel said. “Dick, this is Butcher Vachon, you know, Mad Dog’s brother. We have big plans for him here in Kansas City, so please do what you can for him and us.”

The Bruiser spoke in his really gruff voice and said, “So, you’re the Mad Dog’s brother? Kid, you’re a lot uglier than him. Hope you do as good here as he does for us in Chicago; he’s the champ there.”

When I could get myself to speak, all I could come up with was, “I don’t think I’m ugly.”

He said, “Probably not ugly enough, like your brother and I. This business is not for pretty boys; the big stars in this business are the ugly guys.” All the time, he’s chomping on a big cigar and a chew of tobacco, spitting on a piece of paper on the floor, laughing and talking in that gruff, hissing voice.

All the while, I’m trying to broach the subject of our upcoming match, and wondering why I’m more anxious and apprehensive about this match than when I was wrestling in the main event in Pakistan in front of 85,000 people, or being in the main event in Paris, or wrestling at Sydney Stadium, or the Royal Albert Hall in London.

Finally, I said, “How do you see our match going?”

He said, “Don’t worry about a thing, you’ll look good. Just do the same wild things I do, only wilder. In this town, they will love you.” With that, he said, “I gotta get ready.”

As I was leaving to go to my own dressing room, I saw him pull out the dirtiest jockstrap and pair of trunks I have ever seen or smelled. As I left went, I remember thinking, “I hope he doesn’t wear those in the ring.” But sure enough he did!

I was already in the ring when he was introduced. The crowd, in an instant, all stood up, and screamed and hollered at him. He stopped and hollered back at them.

I jumped him from behind, and knocked him to the floor and would not let him come into the ring. All of a sudden, the crowd’s behind him. They started cheering him and booing me, and in that instant, my reputation was made in Kansas City.

Finally, The Bruiser went wild; he pushed the ringside officials off their chairs, upset their table, grabbed one of their steel chairs, and jumped up on the apron.

When I came to kick him off, he hit me with a steel chair; it staggered me for a moment. He then grabbed me by the arm and whipped me with such

force into the corner of the ring that the ring moved, and I thought the building had moved also. All three ropes came undone, so, recovering quickly, I grabbed the steel turnbuckle that holds the rope to the post.

I hit him on the head, and blood came gushing out. Then he said the strangest thing I've ever heard from somebody who just had his head split open: "Hey kid, blood! That's good! Keep it up, keep it up!"

So I did. I went wild and would not stop. The referee got in the way of the chair, and they had to send in another referee. The Bruiser said, "Keep it up, kid."

Then the law came in. They always had the riot squad on hand when Dick the Bruiser was on the card. This time they were sent in to get me, so they did, and Dick the Bruiser was declared the winner.

I had been disqualified. So they raised his hand, but he was flat on his back, covered with blood from head to toe. Me, I was being escorted out by the police and had never been so happy.

That made me look all the more formidable, and someone to be feared and respected. Better yet, the crowd wanted to kill me.

The valuable lesson that I learned that night was that the ones they get their hands raised are not necessarily the winners. Bruiser had his hand raised, but he was flat on his back, in the middle of the ring, covered with blood.

The whole match didn't last more than 5 minutes, but in the wrestling business, it made me forever.

I also learned a lesson from Bob Geigel, and that was, if you want a job well done, get a professional to do it. Geigel wanted to make a star from an up and comer, so he got the old pro Dick the Bruiser to do it, and it worked.

Notwithstanding the fact that my stay in the Kansas City territory was relatively short, it was pivotal in my career. That's where I switched from being in the wrestling business strictly for world exploration, to being in the wrestling business for the business of making money.

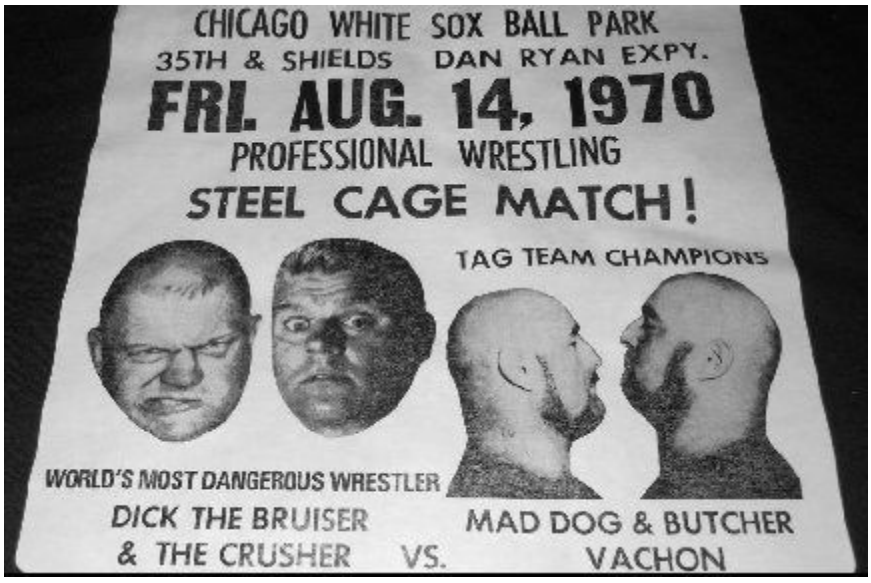
That match with Dick the Bruiser was a great stepping stone because, right after that, the president of the National Wrestling Alliance asked Geigel to send me up there to be seen on his television show.

-9-

After time in the Atlanta territory, we moved again to the upper Midwest to start wrestling for the AWA. It took longer to start making big money in the AWA than it had in Atlanta. However, the underneath money out of Minneapolis (that's money earned while not in the main event) was as good or equal to main event money in Atlanta.

I was getting impatient, and I spoke to Mad Dog about it. We went to talk to Verne Gagne. He said, "I told you guys that I would take care of you, that you would become champions, and that you would make big money. I am a man of my word, and all those things will happen, but you have to remember that this is a huge territory. In fact, it's the largest in the world, and it takes longer for you to get total exposure. That will happen soon, then you guys will make really big money."

That is when he told us about Ray Gunkel, the Atlanta territory promoter that he had gone to school with, who had called him up and tried to get us barred because we had bitched about our payoffs.



Shortly after that talk, we were booked against the AWA tag team champions, Dick the Bruiser and The Crusher in an outdoor show at Comiskey Park in Chicago.

The match was held in a steel cage. There were 25,000 people in attendance, and we made our way to the ring surrounded by dozens of police and security guards. In unison, the crowd started chanting, “We want blood, we want blood.”

Of course, that is what they had been chanting every time we had wrestled at the international amphitheater, Chicago’s premier building, built side-by-side with the stockyards. (I’m not sure they understood the irony of chanting for blood while sitting next to the stockyards.)

Comiskey Park was a Romanesque outdoor venue; I remember thinking that this must have been how the Roman gladiators felt, when they entered the Coliseum with everybody chanting for blood.

The gladiators sometimes were pitted against animals, and that was not so far removed from what my brother Mad Dog and I were doing. When we got down to the ring, Bruiser and Crusher were already in the cage. They were shaking their fists, stomping, jumping and barking, just like a couple of wild dogs, all the while chomping on a couple of big cigars. The cigars were one of their trademarks.

(Photo courtesy of Dr. Mike Lano)

They were billed as cousins and they really looked alike -big, wide chests, blonde brush cut hair. The only thing that really differentiated them was the smell. Bruiser was still wearing the same unwashed pair of wrestling trunks he had worn in that match in Kansas City five years before. In fact, it was probably the same jockstrap he had worn back in 1955 when I'd seen him in Montréal, in my first year in the business.

Crusher was always clean and didn't smell like an old jockstrap.

The place was really noisy for an outdoor show, and the sound doubled when Mad Dog and Butcher made their entrance. We literally had to fight our way into the ring because, egged on by the mob, Bruiser and Crusher did not want to let us into the cage.

The referee tried to stop them; they picked him up and threw him at us through the open cage door. He fell to the floor, was knocked out, and was carried away. I asked Mad Dog what we should do now. "No referee?" Mad Dog said. "Good, we don't need no referee, but first let's get in there!"

By this time, the Illinois boxing and wrestling commission, unbeknownst to anybody, had already made up their minds to disqualify Crusher and Bruiser. They let the match go ahead, only because the crowd would've torn them apart, if they stopped it.

The only seats allowed right around the ring were steel chairs, put there for the use of the commissioners, but by this time, nobody was sitting down. Mad Dog grabbed a chair and said, "Follow me!" Using the chair as a shield, we got into the ring.

Bruiser and Crusher were not the only ones to know how to get a crowd going; Mad Dog was pretty good at it, too. He proceeded to hit Bruiser, and then Crusher, in the head, and then the blood started to flow.

Mad Dog said, "The bastards want blood, let them have it!" Then he threw the chair up over the cage into the crowd. Then the match proceeded, and before you knew it, there was blood on all of us. We got our heads rammed into the steel cage, back and forth, and from side to side.

The massacre lasted for at least 20 minutes-that's a long time for a match of that sort. All the wrestlers were covered in blood and beaten down, when the Illinois Athletic Commission (one of the strictest and most powerful in United States) finally got another referee to come in the ring and declare us as the winners and new AWA world champions.

Of course, there were many different territories, so there could be many different world champions. Crusher and Bruiser would also be tag team world champions in Japan. Same idea, different territory, different belts.

(Photo courtesy of Dr. Mike Lano)

No matter what announcements were made, in the ensuing mayhem, nobody heard anything anyway. The results were that of the Vachon brothers, Mad Dog and Butcher, were world tag team champions.

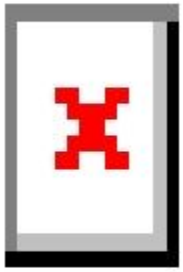
In the out-of-control mayhem and rioting that happened that night at Comiskey Park, nobody had a chance to take a picture of the new champions. For one thing, nobody knew that the title had officially changed hands.

That night, my brother and I had cleaned up in the shower, washed the blood away, and were taking our time and getting into our street clothes. The promoter for the AWA in Chicago came and said to us, “You guys know, of course, that the AWA has commissioned a new set of belts for the tag team championship. We retired the old ones, and now we have new ones.”

Curious as ever, I asked where the belt got made. Bob Luce said, “We had Reggie Parks make them by hand; after all, it’s not something that is mass produced.”

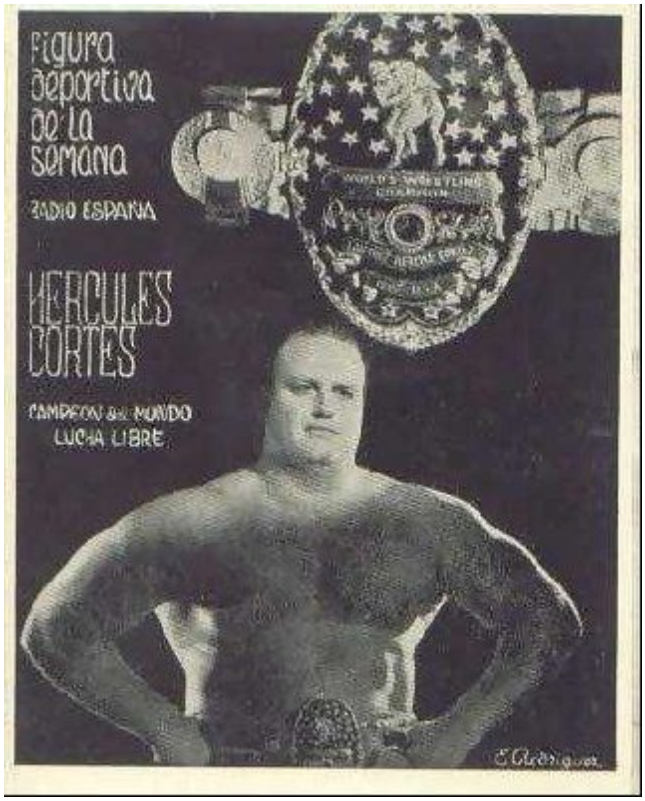
Every wrestling fan knows that Reggie Parks was a very famous wrestler himself, with quite a physique and also a very nice guy. The new belts had been made by Reggie Parks to fit two average size wrestlers. When we

went back to have our official pictures taken, Mad Dog's belt fit perfectly, but my stomach had been growing faster than the rest of me.



Although the belt would go around me, it would not snap shut. In the picture, Mad Dog has his hands in his hips and I've got mine holding the belt up. I had to suck my belly in, so it made my chest look bigger.

It was years before we actually lost the tag team title. Wrestling is like a fraternity. I liked almost everybody that I wrestled with and against. So it was fitting that we lost the title to two people that I liked.



Hercules Cortez looked like a giant next to his partner.

Red Bastien was Mad Dog's size; Cortez was bigger than me. Hercules loved life, and let you know it. He would walk around clapping his hands together, saying, "Vive la vie, vive la vie." He would say it constantly and 4 or 5 languages, because he was of Basque origin, and grew up in the mountain regions between France and Spain.

It was in the Milwaukee arena that we were wrestling those two guys for the AWA tag team titles. The place was packed to the rafters, and the crowd noise was deafening. Milwaukee was like many places in that, when the Vachon brothers went to

wrestle, they had to double the security force. We would wind up going down to the ring surrounded by 40 or 50 of Milwaukee's finest.

This time was no different. We got into the ring last, like champions do. Although we had been surrounded by security, we still had to fight the crazy wrestling fans to get into the ring.

That night, the fans were especially mad at us, for a very specific reason. My brother and I had already made the move to Montréal, and although things had not progressed too well for us up to that point, we still had our obligations to fulfill as AWA tag champions.

We had driven in from Montréal, and had brought with us a young man by the name of Michael Gagnon, as an extra driver, and also for company. He had been, up to that point, a referee for us in Montréal, and also would wrestle once in a while in the preliminaries. Mad Dog said, "Well, Michael, you might as well come with us." Michael, who had never been out of Montréal, jumped at the opportunity.

When we got there and told Wally Karbo who and what he was, Karbo said, "I'll put him on the card and get him a payoff. What the hell, he's here. We will tell the people that the Vachon brothers insisted on having a French referee, otherwise they would not defend their world tag team championship."

The minute they made the announcement, the noise level in Milwaukee Arena went up by several decibels. The buzz was that the dirty Vachon brothers, afraid of losing their belts against such worthy opponents, stacked the deck and would screw Bastian and Cortez.

That's the mood the fans were in, and that's why we had to fight our way into the ring. Before the match, Mad Dog and I had a conversation that went like this: "You know, Paul, in Montréal, we don't need these AWA championship belts. Bastien and Cortez, however, could make a fortune as champions."

I said, "You're right." That was the end of the conversation.

When were introduced, the noise level went up a few more decibels, and a few more decibels were added when they introduced the French referee, Michael Gagnon. The mood of the crowd changed when they realize that the French referee was for real, and he wasn't going to let us get away with anything. He promptly disqualified us when we got mad at him and pushed him around.

Lucky for us, this championship match was a best two out of three falls. The championship cannot change hands on a disqualification, that's the rule. The truth is, also, that losing a fall by disqualification does not mean losing the championship.

Just about now, however, the crowd was getting angrier and angrier. It was starting to dawn on them that all we had to do to save our belts was to get disqualified a second time. After all, we had done that in the past, and that is why we insisted on having a French referee, so that we would be sure to get disqualified, if all else failed.

As we were getting progressively more dirty, that people were sure that was what we were up to. We got Red Bastien in our clutches and doubled up on him.

He tried to tag Cortez, but we wouldn't let him. Try as he might, but couldn't do it, as we are constantly doubling up on him. It was illegal, but at this point the crowd did not want another disqualification, because then their heroes would not become champions. Bastien was fighting gallantly, but he was getting weaken and beaten down. I had him in a full nelson in

the middle of the ring, and, although it’s illegal, my brother came running to hit him and finish him off.

At the last minute, Bastien got loose, and my brother hit me instead of him. I went down.

Mad Dog lunged for Bastien, who escaped Mad Dogs grasp, once, twice, and Bastian finally reached Hercules Cortez. He came into the ring like a cyclone! He hit Mad Dog, who went down. Then he hit me, and I went down. We did this once or twice, and then he started body slamming me- and I weighed 300 pounds at the time! Then, Mad Dog, then me, then Mad Dog, and me again.

By that time, Bastien had recuperated enough to come in and join the fun. We were getting hit from all sides, body slams here, dropkicks there, punches here, punches there, and everywhere! The referee was egging them on.

Just about then, in a desperate move, Mad Dog snuck up on the referee and was going to hit him from behind, to get disqualified. Mad Dog hit him, and Gagnon went down, but he was stunned and couldn’t disqualify us.

The massacre continued. I was staggering from all the blows, and so was Mad Dog. Bastien grabbed me by the arm, and sent me crashing into Mad Dog. Then he grabbed me by the arm again, went to this partner Cortez on the ring apron and whipped me into Cortez’s arms. Hercules snapped the bearhug on me, while Bastien put on the abdominal stretch, his submission finishing hold, on Mad Dog.

By this time, referee Gagnon had sufficiently recovered, and although he couldn’t hear Mad Dog submit, he signaled for the bell, and gave Bastien and Cortez the match, the belts, and the championship!

The people were, at first, stunned and incredulous, and then they see me still in the bearhug. Mad Dog is on the floor. The referee has raised Bastien’s hand, and uncontrolled ecstasy followed.

It is hard for me to explain, and especially hard to put into words, the feeling of satisfaction, accomplishment, and fulfillment that came at that

moment. It’s the closest thing to sexual fulfillment I have ever felt, and I’m sure the three other guys in the ring that night felt the same way.

For a while, Mad Dog was sprawled on the ring floor. Bastien was getting his hand raised. I was stuck in Hercules Cortez’s bearhug and, before he let me go, he said, “Vive la vie, mon frère, vive la vie.” That is French for “Long live life, my brother, long live life.”

A month later, Cortez was dead! So was Michael Gagnon, the young man that had volunteered come to Milwaukee with us.

About a month later, Gagnon was at a wrestling match in Montréal, acting as a referee. He went flying over the top rope without grabbing it to break his fall. He fell flat on his back and suffered cardiac arrest. He was declared dead on his arrival at the hospital.

Hercules Cortez, after defending his newly acquired title in Winnipeg, was driving back to Minneapolis. He fell asleep at the wheel. The car went over the bank and, because he was not wearing a seatbelt, and his car was a convertible, Cortez got thrown up in the air, landed on his head and suffered a broken neck. He died instantly.

I’ve always believed that there’s a special angel that watches over wrestlers, drunks, and fools. Even that angel fell asleep at the wheel that night, when the wrestling world lost one of its best wrestlers, and humanity, one of its best men.

Chapter 8

My Professional Colleagues

-1-

Life after professional wrestling is made little bit easier, somehow, for me, by the presence of wrestling historians. Mind you, they have always been there, present at all pro wrestling venues, big or small.

I must confess, however, that we wrestlers never took them too seriously and, if truth be told, we saw them more as fans or groupies.

In retrospect, that was a mistake. But when you're busy making wrestling history, I know it's a paradox, but you can't be bothered with historians. Especially those of us who were villains. We were more likely to push them out of the way than to befriend them.

However, there were some that made it through that wall of indifference-first-class people like Tom Burke, from Minnesota, Norman Kietzer, Jim Melby, George Napolitano, and, from Sudbury, Ontario, Al Campbell, who became my friend and co-promoter in the Grand Prix wrestling days.

Also to be fair, honorable mention needs to be made here of Lance Nevada, who twice compiled a list of stories, and matches in the thousands, about Mad Dog and me.

It is those guys that have kept the flame going about the old wrestlers like Mad Dog.

It was those guys that made it possible for us to be inducted into the Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame, along with George Tragos and Lou Thesz, in Waterloo, Iowa, on July 10, 2010.

Also on the card that day, as we say in wrestling parlance, was the great Danny Hodge, Mick Foley, René Goulet, Ted Gordienko, representing his late uncle, George Gordienko, as well as my friend the bad boy of wrestling, Terry Funk.

Of course, Mad Dog was also in attendance, although he had been inducted a few years earlier, but let me tell you I was in great company.

Now a discussion about wrestling historians (in my book or any other book) would certainly be incomplete without a mention of wrestling historian emeritus, the Dean himself, J. Michael Kenyon. Before I write any more about him, I must tell the reader that when I signed in at Iowa and the Wrestling Hall of Fame reunion, he had in his hand what seemed to be an original antique version (blue cover) of book number one of the trilogy of books I wrote.

I was flabbergasted, because that particular book had been my first effort in writing my memoirs and putting them out there to see if a book like that could sell. After looking for publishing houses that would pay for the privilege of undertaking such a task and finding none, Deana and I decided to do it ourselves.

The work was mostly hers. Deana, upon coming out of high school, had joined the National Life Insurance Company in Montpelier, Vermont. She had worked there a few short years, when she decided she didn't want to do it anymore. She quit, and promptly walked down the street to the Armed Forces recruiting office and joined the United States Marine Corps.

Years later, when she told me that story, I asked her why she chose the Marines.

She said it was the first one on the right.

For eight years, she was a Marine Staff Sergeant. It didn't faze her a bit to undertake a project like creating and selling a book, because that's the kind of girl my Deana is.

It also did not faze her to undertake a project like marrying a broken down "wrassler" 14 years her senior. And, let me tell you, writing the first book was not an easy project for her. I wrote the book longhand, although after a while she made me print it.

She corrected the spelling, and her friend Barb sat and re-arranged the composition, edited, and Dee typed all that.

Then I bought her a Hewlett Packard printer and she printed all 50 of the first books at Barb's house in Richmond.

Man, oh, man, there were printed pages all over the dining room, the living room, thousands of them. She stapled them together, or glued them together in book form, then printed covers on blue ticker paper and covered the binding with red duct tape.

That was one of the books that J. Michael Kenyon held in his hand and had me autograph at the Hall of Fame, urging me to spell his name right. And I did.

We parted in Iowa and went home from a Hall of Fame that we had both been inducted into, him as a wrestling historian, me as a professional wrestler. I tried to relive in my mind the things and events I had just lived through. I pinched myself to make sure I was really awake.

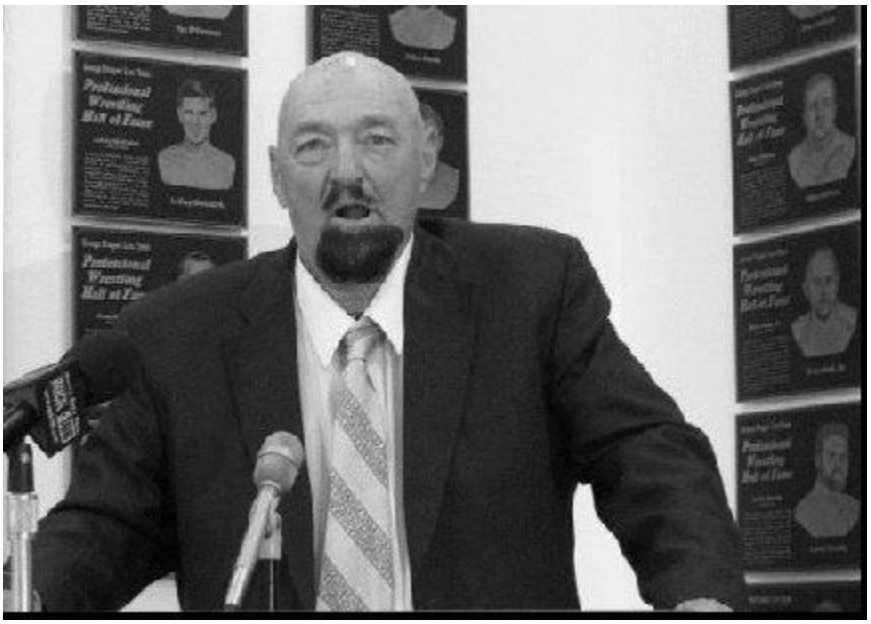
Had it really been, sitting on my right, Terry Funk, the same Terry Funk I had known since he was seven or eight years old?

On my left was the great Olympic and Pro wrestling great Danny Hodge. In front of him, was Mick Foley, wrestling legend and friend of the Vachon family (recruited to that post by my daughter Trudy – Luna).

And there, sitting in front of him, was J. Michael Kenyon, and next to him René Goulet?

What great men I was in company with, not only great men, but great men of wrestling. I was getting goose bumps just sitting there with them.

Then, as I got up to do my acceptance speech, it dawned on me that next to the podium hanging on the wall was a plaque with my name, Paul Vachon, with my likeness on it, surrounded by other plaques of past and present great men of wrestling.



It occurred to me that I would be hanging there, and in company of those great wrestlers for all eternity.

I was just a few heartbeats from crying. I decided to fight the urge, but I told everyone listening to me that I was having a hard time fighting back the tears.

I don't remember the exact words that I said, but to my surprise, at the end of my acceptance speech I got drummed off the podium with a standing ovation.

I bowed and went back to my seat next to Terry Funk, who said "Sure, you son of a gun. I have to follow that?"

So I said "You can do it, kid."

In retrospect, I've been thinking that I should have told him "It serves you right, boy. This is just payback for what your brother Dory and you put my brother Maurice and me through that summer in 1955 in North Bay, Ontario."

George Gordienko was a friend of mine, starting in the early 60s when we both lived in England and wrestled as top heavyweights. I got George

booked across the English Channel in Paris because Roger Delaporte, the French promoter, had trouble finding real heavyweights to wrestle against me. Delaporte was looking for heavyweights for the opening of the new Paris Palais Des Sports. I brought George and the Samoan prince Peter Maivia to him.

After wrestling at the opening, I suggested to George and Peter that we go to a restaurant across town where we might be less likely to be harassed by French wrestling fans. The restaurant was called La Patté a Cochon, which means “pig’s foot”. It is across the street from the giant “Marché aux Puces”. The translation of that name is “flea market”; that is the origin of the term.

It was the most famous restaurant in Paris for meat lovers and, perhaps because of that, was frequented by many of the butchers from the meat shops in the flea market.

When we entered, we were struck by the sight of all these men in bloody aprons, drinking and coming and going. I told George and Peter that we could go unnoticed there, but the maître d' ran over, identified me by name, and said we would get his best table and complementary champagne.

Strolling musicians serenaded us, and we got our picture taken.

Years later, when my physician was going to visit in Paris, I recommended the restaurant to him. He told me he went to the restaurant every year and asked if I knew that a picture of George and me and the maître d' and a couple of musicians was up in the restaurant.

And years after that, when I met George's nephew Ted at a Cauliflower Alley Club reunion, I told him about the good time I had at that restaurant with his uncle. And Ted produced the picture you see below. George is on my right, and the maître d’ is on my left. Peter Maivia had wandered off, to sing with the musicians serenading other tables.

During my life as a professional wrestler I have come into contact with many, many people from the four corners of the world. Although some were great and some were small, I never met a person I didn't like. But I would be fooling myself, and you, the reader, if I did not admit that some I liked more than others, for some have become jewels in my memory.

As I sit here today writing this, I worry that if I don't mention them, when I'm gone, all these jewels would lose their luster. That's why I'm writing these thoughts.

Here is a recollection of the first time I saw and met one of these special people. On my first day ever in England, I was standing on the street in front of the Dale and Martin wrestling office, located in the London suburb of Brixton. I had been invited there by Mr. Martin himself two years previously, when he had been on a talent scouting visit to Australia. As I'm about to go in, I see walking down the street towards me what, at first, I thought was an apparition, but, no, it was my soon to be friend and fellow troubadour.

What I saw coming down the street was a bare-chested guy wearing nothing but a skirt, albeit a very flowery colorful one, with long shoulder-length black hair with a flower stuck in it. He also was wearing the biggest broadest smile I had ever seen. He had the biggest chest, arms, and thighs I had ever seen on anybody wearing a skirt.

The streets of Brixton were, even then, the biggest melting pot in the British Empire. Even there, Prince Peter Maivia literally stopped traffic and made heads turn, including mine. When it became clear that he was going to the same place as I was, I stepped up, shook his hand and said, “Hi, I am Paul Vachon from Canada, just coming in from India.”

He said, with a smile, “I’m Peter Maivia, from Samoa, via New Zealand.”

During my 18 month stay in England I was to become friends with Peter, his wife Lea and their daughter Ata, for as soon as my family and I and found a place to stay, we invited Peter and his family to our house - warming party. Peter brought his guitar and ukulele. We would sing and sometimes his wife and his 16-year-old daughter Ata would sway the hula. We had great family gatherings on the rare weekends off.

After a while my friend Peter and I parted ways. I believe it was at least 10 or 12 years before I saw him again. By that time, Peter and Leah had become grandparents.

Their daughter Ata had married a wrestler by the name of Rocky Johnson, a Canadian from Nova Scotia whose African slave ancestors had been ushered out of slavery by the Underground Railroad and established a colony on Cape Breton. Rocky wrestled for Grand Prix Wrestling in Montréal. That's when I got to learn of his family's history. He told me at that time that his offspring was going to be a prince, because of Atta’s background.

I had said, “What if it's a girl?”

He said, “It's going be a boy, I know. I'm sure of it.”

I saw him again about five or six years later introduced me to his boy, Rocky, Junior. The boy and I became fast friends. While I haven’t seen

Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson in the years since then, I have followed his rise to stardom with pleasure. His mother gave me this picture of the little pebble.

My friend High Chief Peter Maivia died in 1982 of cancer. That left a big hole in my treasure box of memories and I miss him.

I was the proud fellow that had the distinct honor of inducting the now-departed Walter "Killer” Kowalski into the Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame in Amsterdam, New York in 2003.

Tony Vellano, the PWHF President asked me to do the honor because I had known Walter as a fan, as a wrestler whom I had wrestled, and as a promoter. When he was in his fifties, Walter had wrestled for me at Grand Prix Wrestling.

So I had plenty of good things to say about him. I did that with pleasure.

But, at that time, I had a hard time not recounting the time I had pulled his hair while wrestling him.

He had said, "Hey kid, next time you pull me by the hair, grab it by the back, because in front it is a weave and it will come undone.”

You can bet I never did that again, and only mention it now because I am no longer afraid of retaliation.

-7-

Midget wrestling originated in Montréal, from a smalltime wrestler of Italian descent, who wrestled under the name Jack Britton. He recruited four midgets, taught them a few wrestling holds, and how to tumble a bit, and, presto, he started a whole new branch of professional wrestling. The original midget wrestlers were Canadian, although later, they originated from all over. Midgets are natural tumblers and clowns, and it was great wrestling business. They quickly became attractions and in demand all over the world.

In order to facilitate the process of getting work permits in the United States for his Canadian athletes, Jack Britton teamed up with the Detroit promoters Harry Light and Bert Ruby. For the next quarter of a century, if you wanted to boost your wrestling show attendance, you would book an appearance by the midgets, and you had to go through the Detroit territory to do it.

Midget wrestlers included Sky Low Low, Little Beaver, Lord Littlebrook, Fuzzy Cupid, Tom Thumb, Irish Jacky, Little Louie, Little Tokyo, Prince Nichol, Tiny Row, and the Mad Russian. I must say, after seeing thousands of midget matches during my career, that they never failed to make me laugh. That’s what midget wrestling is all about; it’s about making people laugh, and to this day people are always bringing that up. “Boy, were those

midgets ever funny, they sure made me laugh.”

Now, how great is that for an epitaph?

-8-

Life is never dull when traveling from territory to territory. I remember another special attraction that was on the circuit for a short while back in the 1950s. He was billed as an 8 foot, two inch tall wrestler, called …….……. what else? - Paul Bunyan from Walla Walla, Washington - lumberjack country.

Before wrestling, Paul had a three day career in the early NBA with the Rochester Royals.

After the NBA, but before wrestling, he had a rather unsuccessful three year career in acting.

He told his son that he was drinking all the time until he left wrestling, which was a hindrance to both his acting and his athletic performance.

Yes, he was billed as 8 foot two, but that was where his talent ended. In fact, it seems that he was actually 7’7” during his short wrestling career. When he died many years later, at the age of 57, he was measured for his

coffin at 8’2”. This was one case where a wrestler eventually lived up to a promoter’s billing.

I wrestled him as Nicoli Zolatoff. The spelling of that name changed at the promoter’s whim. Since he was trying to convey that I was Russian, he ultimately changed my first name to Nikita, which should have cemented in the fan’s minds that I had to be Russian.

I wrestled Paul for nine days straight, and not once did he put a hold on me.

It taught me, a beginner, how to put holds on myself in order to make a match out of things.

For example, I reached as high as I could, to put a hand behind his head on his neck. Then I grabbed his arm and put it around my neck, so that it looked as though he had put me in a headlock.

That was a skill I’d use quite a few times in the 30 years ahead of me in the business.

Paul Bunyan was a nice guy, rather childish, but nice. I don’t remember running into him again after that, but he had more than doubled attendance in Bert Ruby’s Michigan territory.

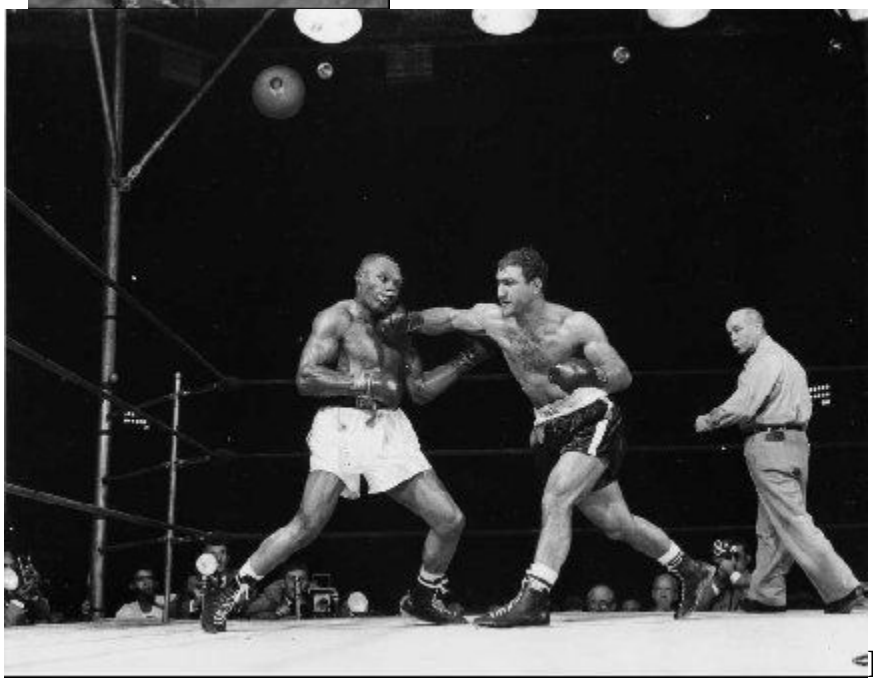
Paul’s real name was Max Palmer. After wrestling, Paul became a traveling evangelist, billing himself as Goliath for Christ. In his preaching, he often said that drugs and alcohol ended his wrestling career.

He certainly wasn’t the first, nor the last, wrestler who could say that, but he certainly was the tallest.

Retired world champion boxers were sometimes an added attraction, mostly as referees. Joe Louis tried to be a wrestler, but found it to be too hard on

his body. Various other former champions included Rocky Marciano, Jersey Joe Walcott, Archie Moore, and Muhammad Ali.

Of all the great boxers mentioned above, the only one that I knew well was Jersey Joe Walcott. He was such a great boxer, and had such quick reflexes, that he never let anybody hit him in the head.



He told me that one guy had snuck in a punch to the head that hit him so hard that it knocked him down to the canvas, and, although he said he could've gotten up before the count of 10, he decided to stay down and give up the championship. He told me that when the referee was counting him out, he was thinking, "If I get up from here, he might just hit me that hard again and would kill me."

Rocky Marciano became champion, but he also wound up punch drunk and walking on his heels. Walcott boxed until he was a middle-aged man but never did get punch drunk.

My brother Mad Dog found out firsthand what a great boxer Jersey Joe was. It happened in Stu Hart's territory in Western Canada. Stu had brought in Walcott as a special referee to officiate one of our tag team matches with the Scott brothers. Walcott had disqualified us in front of a packed house. Mad Dog took a swing at him, and Walcott put Mad Dog to the mat with one of his famous haymakers.

When Mad Dog got up, he challenged Jersey Joe to a wrestling match. Jersey Joe, not being out of his mind, did not want to wrestle with the Olympian wrestler. So he said, "I won't wrestle you, but I'll box with you."

Mad Dog said, "KO, no, not KO, but okay!" It was just a slip of the tongue. All that exchange had been done on television, in order to draw big crowd in Regina, Saskatchewan and it worked.

The house was sold out in advance. Matches between a boxer and a wrestler had been debated and talked about for many years. Gorilla Monsoon would compete against Muhammad Ali.

(Photo courtesy of Dr. Mike Lano)

The fact is that, through the years, the match that had been talked about was between a wrestler that could wrestle and a boxer that could box, wearing gloves and all. To me, that is a no-brainer- the wrestler would win hands down. The fact is that once a wrestler gets in there, all he has to do to neutralize the boxer by leg diving (which is a very basic and elementary move in Olympic or professional wrestling), bringing him down to the mat,

and how can you swing at anybody, when you're all tied up and squirming on the floor of the ring?

But this match between Mad Dog and Walcott was a boxing match between an ex-world champion boxer and a guy that had never boxed a day in his life-unless you count all the unsanctioned street fights when he has a teenager and a nightclub bouncer in the toughest Montréal nightspots.

Mad Dog was sort of apprehensive, and worried about going at it without anyone getting hurt. He talked to Jersey Joe about it, and Joe laughed at him in his good-natured way and said, "Don't worry about a thing, Maurice. Just keep your fists up and come swinging."

Mad Dog asked, "How long are we going?"

Walcott said that, "I'll leave it up to you." Jersey Joe knew that, although the 30-year-old Mad Dog was one of the best conditioned athletes in the world, unless you've trained as a boxer for years, the hardest thing to do is hold your arms up constantly for 10 or 12 minutes at a time.

The day of Mad Dog's bout was a rare day off for me, so I didn't see it. On the morning after his match with Walcott, I was anxious to find out how things worked out, so I went to the airport to meet Mad Dog and asked him.

He said, "I carried him for four rounds, and then I dumped him."-And then he told me what really happened.

In the first round, Mad Dog, and Jersey Joe sparred, sort of feeling each other out. Mad Dog would take a giant swing at him every once in a while. Jersey Joe's reflexes were so good that the minute Mad Dog started to swing, Walcott would quickly pivot, and by the time Mad Dog's gloved fist got there, Jersey Joe would be long gone. He would be going the other way and that is exactly what he'd done with other boxers he faced in his illustrious career. That's why he was not punch drunk-nobody could hit him.

Jersey Joe was in his 50s, then, and Mad Dog was 30, but he still could not hit him. Mad Dog told me that after four rounds of swinging and hitting nothing but air, he simply could not hold up his arms any longer.

When the bell sounded in the fourth round, jersey Joe turned his back on Mad Dog and was heading back to his corner. Mad Dog ran at him from behind and hit him in the back of the head. The referee quickly disqualified him.

But as he was rushing a departing Walcott, Joe's fist came up all the way from the floor to hit Mad Dog squarely in the jaw. It looked so devastating and so real that Mad Dog went down and, although the referee had already disqualified him, he counted him out and raised Jersey Joe's hand in victory and the crowd went wild!

Mad Dog also told me that Jersey Joe was so good at his trade that he, Mad Dog, had never felt a thing when Jersey Joe punched him.

-10-

A promoter outside of normal territorial rules was The Bearman, Dave McKigney. Dave ran shows everywhere, no matter what official territory the town belonged to. He would rent whatever hall he could, and come in with his own wrestlers, men, women, midgets, and, yes, his bear.

Dave had his own bear, one that he had trained to wrestle. If he could not find someone else to wrestle the bear, he would do it himself.

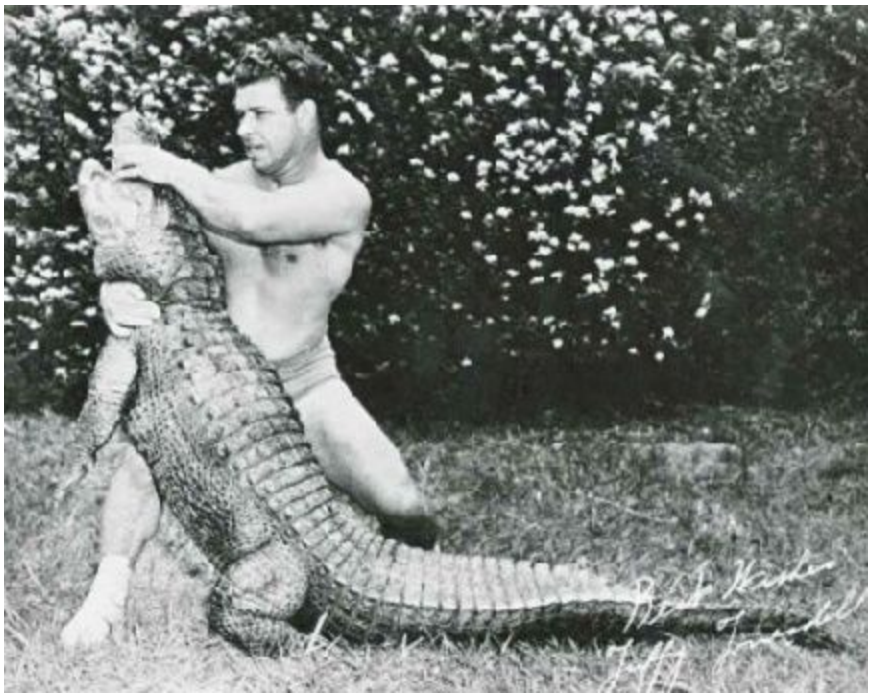
On the day of the matches, he would come into town in his truck plastered with wrestling posters, carrying the ring, and pulling the bear in the trailer behind him. He would put up the ring, and then he would find place to give his bear a walk, and hose him down. Most of the time, it was in a public park or beach, or wherever he could get the most exposure.

(Photo courtesy of Dr. Mike Lano) A couple of times, well, he had supposedly been taking a nap in the truck, the bear got away and was nowhere to be found. Dave had no choice but to call a couple of radio stations to help alert the public and have everybody help look for the bear. Invariably, the bear would be found by his owner, at about suppertime. He had somehow wandered away and then returned to the wrestling venue, or had curled up in some parked car's backseat, or somebody's backyard.

You could expect a packed house, thanks to Victor, the bear. I wrestled Victor many times, and was never seriously hurt once. Bears love to wrestle, and they are naturals at it. But when he wrestled with any of us, he was only play-wrestling. If he was serious, a 500 or 600 pound bear with one swipe could tear your insides out.

Tuffy Truesdale was a wrestler that owned an alligator farm in tropical southern Ontario. He convinced one or two promoters that it was safe for him and the public for him to wrestle an alligator in the ring.

Tuffy had a special tank built in the back of his Pontiac station wagon. He had some water in there, and that's where the alligator rode. Tuffy and his wife slept on the mattress that he had put on top of the tank. That is where they lived, when they had bookings.



When they were on the road, they didn't want to leave the alligator unattended. I think it was more to protect would-be car thieves. I would love to have seen the expression on the face of the thief that had stolen Tuffy's station wagon, when the alligator crawled out of his hiding place.

-12-

Gorilla Monsoon was the strongest wrestler I ever wrestled, except for Andre the Giant.

His strength did him more good when he wrestled me than when he wrestled a monkey.

When he was just a young punk breaking into the business, a carnival came into town. A sideshow tent offered $100 for anybody that could stay in the ring for 5 minutes while wrestling their monkey.

Monsoon was 6 foot six and weighed in at, at least, 375 pounds.

He had no intention of wrestling the monkey. But his friend who was about 6 feet tall and weighed 250 pounds and could bench press over 500 pounds,

figured, “how hard can it be to stay in the ring for five minutes with a 125 pound monkey?”

At the time, Monsoon and his friend were wrestling most nights for $25 or $30, so $100 would be welcome. His friend was none other than Bruno Sammartino, who was destined to become the most famous wrestler of his era.

As soon as Bruno got into the ring and close to the monkey, he tried to grab him, and put a hold on him, but he never got the chance.

Fast as can be, the monkey proceeded to tear all of Bruno Sammartino’s clothes off, within half a minute.

The future champion stood in the middle of the ring, naked except for his underwear and shoes.

Gorilla Monsoon said, “What you want to do?”

Bruno said. “I want to get out of here!”

Monsoon said, “You’ve only been in there for a minute.”

Bruno said. “To hell with that! I’m getting out of here before that gorilla tears my underwear off.”

Then Monsoon said, “That’s not a gorilla, that’s a 125 pound monkey. I am the Gorilla here.”

Bruno said. “I’ll wrestle you any time, but never a monkey again.”

Chapter 9

From Wrestler to Promoter

-1-

Just about everybody that's ever put on a pair of wrestling trunks and wrestled professionally thinks that he or she can become a successful promoter.

I don't know what makes them think that, unless it's the thought that anybody could do better than those thieving, heartless promoters that gave them lousy bookings, and then cheated them out of their rightful earnings. Such promoters always falsified gate receipts by declaring them lower than what they actually were.

There were exceptions, wrestlers that broke the rule and went from wrestling to promoting and did well. Some of the names that come to mind are Dory Funk, Senior, (West Texas), Larry Kasaboski (Northern Ontario), Verne Gagne, the AWA founder and a good payoff man (Minneapolis), and Paul Boesch (Houston, Texas).

But some of the biggest and most successful promoters had never wrestled a match, as far as I know. Men like Vincent McMahon, Senior, my friend and drinking buddy. (He liked me because I used to sing Irish songs with him after TV tapings in Philadelphia.)

He was the promoter for the entire northeastern seaboard (including New York City's Madison Square Garden); from Bangor, Maine, to Washington, DC, and all cities in between, as well as from west to east and from Pittsburgh to Cape Cod. He was a great man and a gentleman that everybody liked to work for, including me.

Other promoters who never wrestled include the great Frank Tunney (Toronto, Ontario), Eddy Quinn (Montréal, Québec), Sam Muchnick (St.

Louis, Missouri), Fred Kohler (Chicago), Jim Barnett (Australia), and Jim Crockett, Senior (mid-Atlantic states).

The wrestling promotion set up in Montréal was, to say the least, chaotic, and not very conducive to success. The biggest problem was too many chiefs and no Indians (if you don't count the real Indian, Billy Two Rivers, or the Indian of doubtful lineage, Johnnie War Eagle).

The man whose idea it was to set up the company in the first place was an old-time wrestling promoter, Gerry LeGault, who had made his money in real estate. When they asked Edouard Carpentier to join them, he said he would, if it didn't cost him anything, and if they could get Maurice Vachon to come in with them.

They dispatched two of the partners to Minneapolis to talk to Mad Dog. I was present at both meetings and at neither of them did anybody mention my name as a possible partner. I didn't much care because we were secure, in our place as AWA world champions. I didn't think Maurice would go for it, anyhow.

We would have to leave the territory where we were champions and on top, making big money, and change that for a territory where we would be pioneering, with a very uncertain future. (It has been said that the pioneers get all the arrows, and the settlers all the land.)

But because of Mad Dog's combative and competitive nature, I was not surprised when he accepted. He gave me the ultimatum to quit drinking and he would give me half his share in the promotion.

We gave notice to the AWA. When Verne Gagne found out, his reaction was predictable. He got mad, then furious. He reminded us of all the work and time that had been put into finally making us champions. Then he called us assholes.

Then he wished us luck and promised to come and help us if he could. He offered to wrestle on some of our cards. Later, he would help save Grand Prix Wrestling, as it was committing suicide.

According to the old guard that was running the show, that is, the older partners, if we could keep plugging until a big show came along, we would make a fortune, and the future would be secure. They even tried to convince me of that, but I held to my belief that without the big three, we didn't have a chance. The big three were a television contract, a Montréal Athletic Commission license (which is normally awarded to just one man, not a company or corporation), and dates at the Montréal Forum.

What made these possibilities of ever happening a bigger longshot was that the three big things were in the hands of the existing promoter, and our opposition, Johnny Rougeau.

The problem with him was that he was not a nice man. He liked to demean people and laugh at them. He was also two-faced. He would praise you when you're in his presence, and then belittle you in front of others in your absence.

Our big show was shaping up well with Verne Gagne, Bruno Sammartino, women wrestlers, midgets, and an international gathering of English, Australian, New Zealanders, Canadians, and Europeans.

The night of the big show, the big shot promoter that was present was Verne Gagne. He was holding court in the dressing room. My partners asked him, "What do you think of our prospects after this successful show?"

Verne asked them, "How many people did you draw?"

One of my partners replied, "We had a pretty good house."

Verne said, "How many people?"

"We don't know, but the house was half-full."

Verne said "Okay, how many people does this place hold?"

Again, nobody knew what the answer was.

Verne said, "Before you can know if your show was successful or not, you have to know how much it cost to put it on, and then how much money you

drew. You guys will never make it, because nobody knows those things. No business can run itself."

Verne continued, "You have to have somebody in charge, and he would need three things. First, and foremost, you need weekly television. Second, you need the Montréal forum. And in order to get the forum, you need an athletic commission license."

Then he turned to Mad Dog, and me, and said, "I can't believe you guys left Minneapolis, and left us in the lurch, to come to a place that didn't have these basic things."

Soon thereafter, we started having weekly shows in the Montréal suburb of Verdun at the Verdun Auditorium. I made the pitch that I should be in charge, taking the head job that Verne had said we needed.

I went to the man in charge of radio station CKVL and said, "If you saturate your airways with our wrestling commercials for the Auditorium show, we will provide you with all the interview material with our biggest stars."

We closed the deal when I agreed to give them 15% of the net receipts from our shows.

CTV was sitting on a tape of our big show at the Maurice Richard Arena. I knew something, even then, that they didn't know. Verne Gagne had told me that television wrestling gets good ratings, regardless of the language it was broadcast in. It just needed to be shown at a time when kids would watch.

Frustrated that CTV seemed unwilling to broadcast the tape, I took it from them and walked out, even though we didn't have any place to broadcast it yet.

At the time, I was 33 years old and really didn't know anything about business. When I was called on to make critical business decisions, they were made on pure instinct and impulse.

For the first time in my life, I had been put in a position where I had to make decisions that didn't only affect me and my kids, but the whole welfare of our enterprise. So I wasn't going to fail because of indecision on my part.

The promotional advertisements on radio station CKVL were paying off big time. They played at least four times an hour, 24 hours a day. The station believed their signal carried for a 50 mile radius around Montréal. However, I drove east and could still pick up their signal 150 miles away, close to Québec City.

I found a TV station in Sherbrooke that had a specially built studio with built-in bleachers that can hold 250 people. They agreed to produce three shows, taped in one day every three weeks. Unfortunately, their signal would not reach to Montréal, but at least we now had a show, at 11 AM on Sunday mornings.

In those days, there was no time to rest. I was living in my car, a station wagon my wife and I had bought in Duluth, Minnesota. I was running on adrenaline and sober. When I got tired, I would pull up at a rest area, unroll my foam mattress in the back and sleep awhile. I never slept longer than 20 minutes or half an hour.

By this time we were promoting in New York State, Vermont, Ontario, and New Brunswick, as well as Québec. I promoted our product as clean wrestling as opposed to the baseball bats, football helmets, and even cattle prods that were appearing on Rougeau's shows. One of his managers would use racial slurs against the French Canadians, saying they were second-class citizens, and not as good as he was. He would say things like, if anybody was to do him harm, they would be sued by his law firm of Walberg, Goldberg and Steinberg. It's a laughing matter now, but it sure was devastating to the wrestling business then.

As I was going to various television stations, trying to find one that would broadcast to Montréal, I promoted one special, coming attraction.

Grand Prix Wrestling had almost gone out of business by the time I took over the job of promoter. A friend of mine, a world-renowned wrestler from Montréal named Frank Valois, told me about this guy he had trained to become a professional wrestler who was 7'4" tall and weighed 425 pounds-and was supposedly still growing.

Frank said his protégé was 24 years old. Frank had met him when the young man was 21 and made his living acting as a bodyguard for prostitutes working in the Montmarte district of Paris. Not surprisingly, the girls always felt safer when he was around so they would hand him some money every time they got a client.

I would not have called him a pimp (at least not to his face), but I guess he was pretty close to that.

Frank said, “If you want to pay his airline ticket to come over and work for Grand Prix Wrestling, I can get him. What do you say?”

I said, “Hell, yes!”

I remember writing a check for a first-class ticket on Air France from Paris to Montréal. Why first-class? Because he wouldn't fit into a tourist class seat.

Frank said his protégé's name in France was Jean Ferré, which was reminiscent of the legendary French strongman Leo Ferré.

Jean Ferré became one of the reasons for the recovery and success of grand pre-wrestling.

After couple of years of working day and night, building up the promotion, I decided on the spur of the moment to take a week off and take my family to Paris. Nothing much was happening with Grand Prix Wrestling then anyway. My wife Van, and my daughters Trudy (Luna), and Paulette, came along.

When we got to the hotel in Paris, we went directly to bed, worn out from the trip. At 6 AM, there was a knock at our hotel room door. I opened the door to a great big grinning giant, who said, “Hello, boss!”

I said, ”What the hell are you doing here?”

He said “You are here, aren’t you? This is my town. I rented a car and I'll show you around. Bring the girls. Let's go boss!”

He would not take no for an answer.

Over the next week, the girls and I saw more of Paris during the day than Parisians see in their lifetimes. At night, my wife and I left the girls with the nanny that had been provided by the hotel, while we went off for an evening with our over-sized chauffeur and tour guide to the Paris nightlife. We saw bars, nightclubs and restaurants.

We also came into contact with an enormous number of business girls. They were very happy to see their giant, but sad that he wasn't back to stay. Some shared tokens of their appreciation with him, when he would excuse himself and disappear with a couple of them.

He became very good friends with my family, especially Trudy, who was then 12 years old. Trudy made him promise that when she turned 21, he would buy her Cadillac.

After a great week in Paris, I hadn't even been back in my office for a full day, when my secretary said that I had a call from Chicago promoter Richard Afflis.

Dick Afflis had wrestled under the name of Dick the Bruiser. I knew that, for years, Afflis had been a silent partner, with Bob Luce as the front man, in the Chicago wrestling office. Bruiser was a good judge of talent. On cards in Indianapolis, he had used as a ring announcer a young, comparatively unknown David Letterman.

When I called him back, the first thing he said, without even saying hello, was, “Butcher, we want to use your giant.”

Not to be outdone in abruptness, I said, “You can’t have him. He's too busy here.”

The Bruiser’s raspy voice responded, “Butcher, you son of a bitch. Don't you remember that I came to work with you guys, when you had that big

show at the ballpark in Montréal and you needed big names on the card?”

So I said, “All right, you can have him for one big show at your ballpark, but it will cost you.”

He said, “How much?”

Off the top of my head. I said, “$5000, and another $2000 for the guy we send with him to wrestle him and make him look good.”

Bruiser said “You're crazy, nobody gets that much money up front.”

(That was an unheard-of amount for a guarantee in those days.)

Bruiser said, “We have plenty of wrestlers here who could work with him. Who are you going to send that's worth $2000?”

I said, “Me, The Butcher.”

Bruiser said he would talk with his partners about the money, and he would get back to me.

“But before I go, what is your giant's name?”

I said, “Jean Ferré.” (That last name is pronounced, more or less, like “fairy”.)

Bruiser said, “What kind of name is that? What do the people in Montréal call him?”

I said, “They call him Le Geant Ferré.”

Bruiser asked what that would translate to in English.

I said that would be something like The Giant Fairy.

Dick said, “This is me, The Bruiser, telling a guy called The Butcher that we can't call this guy the giant fairy. We would get laughed out of the business. What is his real name?”

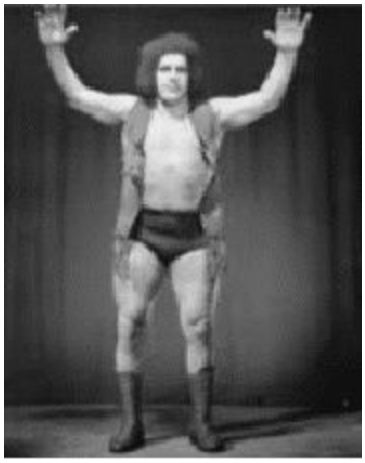
I said, “Andre Roussimoff.”

Bruiser said “we will call him Andre the Giant.”

Ironically, it wasn't until I was writing this book that I learned that Andre had wrestled in Paris as “Butcher Roussimoff.”

We hadn't needed two Butchers wrestling in North America.

And according to Dick the Bruiser, we didn't need any fairies either.



(Photo courtesy of Dr. Mike Lano)

One problem we did not anticipate when we brought the Giant in was that not everybody wanted to work with him. When you wrestled with the Giant, there was no place to go but down. Nobody could even get him off his feet, if he didn’t want to go. He had been taught not to go down. So when anybody wrestled him, they would look really bad.

One exception to that rule was “The Pro.” Doug Gilbert was a masked wrestler that Maurice and I had known for about 10 years. This guy had everything going for him for all those years, but in spite of that, he had never quite made it to the top. He was good-looking, with lots of hair, a body builder’s physique, and very agile.

So you say, “If this guy was such a catch, why had he not gotten over as a big star?”

Mad Dog put his finger on it when he said, “This guy’s got everything except facial expression; he is the original stone face. It is hard for someone like that to get over in this business, as either a villain or a baby face. He would be an asset to us, but he would have to work under a mask.”

The Pro was 5 foot 10, and a chiseled 275 pounds. Even though he was a masked villain, his style fit right in with what we are trying to establish-a family friendly, respect the rules and the referee, kind of show.

So, after a few weeks of the Giant wrestling a couple of normal size nobodies and disposing of them easily, the fans started clamoring for the Pro and the Giant to meet.

Their match was quite entertaining. The Pro would use finesse and his wrestling skills to put a hold on the Giant, when nobody before had even been able to do that. Then, with brute strength, the Giant would get out of it. The Giant was just too big and too overpowering.

Then The Pro picked the Giant up for a body slam. The whole crowd let out a gasp and the arena went quiet.

When he slammed him down, the whole building seemed to shake. You could see that the Herculean effort that the Pro had put into that feat had left him, spent.

I couldn’t believe my eyes when he managed to pick the Giant up for another body slam. It was all he could do to get him up over his head.

That is when the Giant, as if waking up after a bad dream, started kicking his giant legs and waving his arms in the air. This made The Pro lose his balance, and, under that weight, he fell over the top rope. He hit the floor below, with the Giant on top of him. The Giant landed on top of The Pro, unhurt, but The Pro was knocked out.

The Giant climbed back into the ring, and The Pro was counted out. The referee gave the match to the Giant, who refused it, saying, “Let him have a rematch. I don’t want to win like that.”

When I went around to Andre’s dressing room, he asked if the Pro was okay. I said he was. Then I asked him, “Why did you let him pick you up and body slam you?”

Andre said, “I wanted to make him look good. I am so tired of wrestling against losers.”

I said, “Don’t do that again.”

He said with a big smile, “Okay, boss.”

Then I added, “Unless you are wrestling me!”

He had been in Montréal for three weeks, and already he was speaking English. We became good friends, and it had nothing to do with me being his boss. He never let anyone body slam him again until I did a few years later, in a handicap match in a big show in Chicago with my partner, Larry Hennig.

Years later, Hulk Hogan said that Andre let him body slam him. The only difference was that, by then, body slamming the Giant was worth millions of dollars to the Hulk. As a matter fact, he is still reaping the benefits of that career move.

-6-

When I went back to channel 12 in Montréal, they agreed to air a weekly show. They would air three one-hour shows already in the can from our big show at Maurice Richard Arena.

Now, I had to work on getting a Montréal Athletic Commission license in order to promote wrestling at the Montréal Forum. The stumbling block was that there was already an existing wrestling license in the city and Johnny Rougeau owned it.

The license was actually in the name of his surrogate Bob “Legs” Langevin. Rougeau did this to allow him to wrestle. The commission would not allow you to be both a wrestler and a promoter.

Montreal, Quebec, August 11, 1973

Therefore, when we decided to use my name as the promoter in Montréal, I would forgo wrestling, but in Montréal only.

Now we had television in Montréal, Québec City, Sherbrooke, and Ottawa. Our next step was to go for the license.

When we went before the commission, the first point they made was that I didn't live in Montréal. (My wife and I lived just across the river from Montréal.) They said they could only grant licenses to Montréal residents who would promote wrestling or boxing at the Montréal Forum.

The chiropractor who was the head Commissioner seemed to take special delight in saying, "Request denied! Good day, gentlemen."

Our lawyer was aghast when I responded to the Commissioner. I said, "Before I leave, I would like to say a few words for the record. I would like to address the matter of me not having close ties to the city of Montréal. First of all, I, along with 11 of my brothers and sisters, was born here in Montréal. My father was a sergeant of detectives on the Montréal police force, which, as you know, is headquartered right next door to the City Hall,

and run by my godfather, Jean Paul Picard, who is deputy chief. Don’t tell me I don’t have ties to the city!”

The next day, I found out from my parents that they had moved back to the farmhouse in the townships. Therefore, they would not need the small basement apartment in Montréal they had bought when they sold the farm to my brother Reggie.

I had the lease put in my name. Then we sent an official letter to the commission advising them of my residence in Montréal.

-7-

A couple of years earlier, Mad Dog and I were flying back to Minneapolis, after successfully defending our tag team title in Chicago. As the plane was about to leave, an old bunch of rough-looking characters who looked familiar, boarded the plane. It was the Montréal Canadiens. We got to talk with many of the legends of hockey, including Gump Worsley, Henri Richard, and Jean Beliveau.

It turns out, hockey players like wrestlers and wrestling, so they were every bit as excited to see us as we were to see them.

Beliveau told us he was retiring after the season. The Molson family offered him a lifetime position as vice president in charge of hockey operations, with an office in the Montréal Forum!

Two years later, we would receive a letter from the commission, saying that, despite my residency in Montréal, they wouldn’t consider granting us the license unless we could produce proof that we had booked dates at the Montréal Forum.

When I went to the Montréal Forum, the manager was very cordial but adamant that he could not book us since we did not have a license from the commission.

He told me he could not do it because it would set a precedent and would go against the policy of the Molson Company not to rent the building until all the required permits were in.

I told Mad Dog this sad story over the telephone. That is when Mad Dog told me the story of what Johnny Rougeau had done to aggravate Jean Beliveau.

It seems that a completely false rumor had circulated about Beliveau's beautiful blonde wife. The rumor was that she had once had an affair with Johnny Rougeau. Bastard that he was, Rougeau added fuel to the fire by not denying it.

Mad Dog said he would call Beliveau.

Beliveau called me and asked what we wanted. I told him I wanted 17 dates at the Forum, for wrestling. He said, "I'll call you back in 20 minutes. The manager's office is right next to mine."

In 5 minutes, he called back and said, "Paul, come and get your dates. The manager is expecting you, and don't worry about Rougeau's dates."

We sent a registered letter to the athletic commission with our dates. Our license arrived soon thereafter.

The advance ticket sales for the first show at the Forum were very good, which is not a surprise, since the show had four months of television promotion. We were certain of success until 6:45 PM on the January evening of the show when a mixture of rain, snow, and hail blew in on 30 mile an hour winds. All we got for our work was the advance ticket sales, and many of those people didn't even show up.

However, the media coverage was tremendous. Although our revenue was half of what we had expected, the business community believed our company was a success. And, we had many Forum shows after that with larger crowds. But with that show, it seemed we had earned respectability. Now we were promoters-big time!

Our taped wrestling show now aired in Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Québec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. We also got exposure in all the northern states

bordering Canada, particularly upstate New York and Vermont because of the stations in Watertown, Plattsburgh, and Burlington.

The success was the result of all the seemingly trivial little things we had been taking care of all our wrestling lives, and our natural lives. Little things like smiling at people, being polite, and treating people like we would like to be treated ourselves. All those things I learned from my parents.

-9-

Grand Prix Wrestling took off when we started promoting the Match of the Century: the 7'4", 425 pound Jean Ferré against "The Mormon Giant" Don Leo Jonathan at 6 foot six and 320 pounds. I got calls from promoters around the world who wanted to book a match in their territories.

Dick the Bruiser, in Indianapolis, wanted the match; he eventually got Andre the Giant, but not Don Leo Jonathan. What he got was the Giant and a 340 pound opponent for him: Paul "The Butcher" Vachon.

In order to enhance the Giant's drawing power, the Chicago wrestling promoters wanted a handicap match. They gave me as a partner Larry Hennig, from Minneapolis, a very good and strong wrestler who had been a tag team champion, along with his partner, Harley Race.

When Larry and I were introduced to the crowd that knew us well from previous appearances, we were ushered into the ring to cries of, "We want blood, WE WANT BLOOD!"

When the Giant came walking through the crowd, head and shoulders taller than everybody else, and smiling that eternal smile of his, something happened that I had never experienced before, with a Chicago crowd. They went silent, as if awestruck by the sight of this mastodon suddenly in their midst. The silence didn't last long. When they realize they were seeing, for the first time in America, the true-to-life Giant that they had been hearing about.

We watched as Andre got on the apron of the wrestling ring, and then, instead of bending over and coming through the ropes, he swung one big

giant leg over all the ropes and walked into the ring.

By that time, the whole crowd was in love with him, and they were sure he was going to make short work of us.

Larry looked intimidated by Andre's size. I said to Larry "I bet you I can body slam him."

Larry burst out laughing and said, "yeah, yeah, sure." Then, without setting the stakes, he said. "Okay, you're on."

As he walked to the middle of the ring for instructions from the referee, who was checking Larry for hidden objects in his trunks, I spoke in French to Andre the Giant, who, as always, was smiling and laughing. "I bet my partner I could body slam you."

Andre laughed out loud, and he said, "Yes, Boss."

While Andre had been working for me when I was a promoter, we would always speak in French, except when he said, "Yes, Boss."

Andre was fluent in English, two months after he arrived here. Not only was he big and strong and one hell of an athlete, but he was a highly intelligent human being as well. He was my friend, and I miss him.

(Photo courtesy of Dr. Mike Lano)

That night in Chicago, Andre the Giant was the winner of the handicap match, but he let me body slam him first. If he hadn't let me, I never could have.

Of course, turnabout is fairplay. He body slammed me, on his way to victory.

My friend Andre Roussimoff had started wrestling in France. The French wrestling was promoted on a small scale. Had he stayed there, this great star attraction would never have risen to world renown. For a fledgling company like Grand Prix Wrestling, he was a godsend.

-10-

In the match of the century, once it began, Don Leo and Andre immediately locked horns. Don Leo gave Andre a giant shove, which pushed him back about a foot. They locked horns again, and Andre pushed Don Leo back with such force that he flew all the way back against the corner turnbuckle, and the ring shook violently.

Don Leo had never been pushed back that forcefully, and with such strength; he stared at Andre in disbelief. Don Leo must've thought that he couldn't win with strength so he better use his legendary agility.

When they locked up again, he grabbed Andre in a headlock. Andre pushed him off into the ropes, and Don Leo bounced back, he used the momentum and the slingshot effect of the ropes. He dropkicked Andre across the upper chest almost 7 feet high. Andre just went down on one knee, which is the lowest anybody had ever knocked him down.

On one knee, he was still about 6 feet tall. From a standing position in front of him, Jonathan sprung up and put a flying head scissors on Andre's head and neck, intending to bring him tumbling down to the mat. It would've worked if the recipient of this maneuver had not been Andre.

Instead, Andre just grabbed him in his arms, like you would a baby, and carried him to the edge of the ropes and deposited him gently on the apron of the ring.

They were both taking part in a match worthy of the name "Match of the Century." The battle went on for a good 30 minutes. Both men were showing their stuff, toe to toe, until they tired of outwitting one another, and started whipping one another into the corner turnbuckles.

The man that had built the ring had made special adjustments so that the ring would not collapse under the weight and shockwaves of these giant men slamming each other into the corners. The carpenter who built the ring had even asked me to use my 340 pounds to test the ring. I somersaulted and landed on my back in the middle of the ring and nothing gave, not even my back.

Therefore, I was pretty confident that the ring would hold up, but I started to have my doubts when Don Leo, whipped by Andre, hit the corner turnbuckles going 90 miles an hour. The ring held, but when he went to do it again, Don Leo had the presence of mind to reverse it on him.

He whipped Andre into the corner, and when he hit it, it made a mighty shattering noise. Don Leo came roaring across the ring with the flying tackle, the corner ropes collapsed under the shock and the ring came apart.

Then all hell broke loose. The referee rightly rang the bell and ended the match, but, of course, in the roar of the crowd, nobody heard it but me, it seemed.

All the members of Forum security were uniformed policemen, but not armed, thank God. They did not dare go into the ring, and who can blame them for that. But somebody in the tunnel, where all the other wrestlers had gathered-none of them had left-had the presence of mind to send the

wrestlers into the ring, to quell the two giants and prevent the rapidly developing riot.

For a while, it added to the pandemonium. But I'm sure that it prevented a riot. That was the way the Match of the Century ended! We could not have come up with a better ending, even if we had planned it. Yes, there was no winner, but even more important for everyone concerned, there was NO LOSER!

Bear in mind that, before the match, together they were the biggest drawing card, but the loser in this kind of match is dropped from this equation. Only the winner retains the title of biggest drawing card.

It is ironic that the one thing we have taken precautions against happening, because we thought it would've been a catastrophe if it happened, was the ring falling apart. And it would've been, if it happened in the first few minutes of the match, but not after half an hour or so of these two giants battling each other, putting on a great show of strength, both wrestling-wise and agility-wise.

The ring falling apart and ending the match, far from being a calamity, was actually a windfall. You would be justified if you thought of that match as the high water mark of Grand Prix Wrestling. You would be justified, because we did get pretty high marks for that show, but we grew and grew after that.

You might say we went over the high water mark, and into flood stage.

All I had known about the finances when I became a partner was that the original capital investment of $24,000 ($4000 apiece from each partner) was long gone. As a matter of fact, it was now a $30,000 deficit.

From the time I took over-when no one else wanted to-we started bringing in more money than was going out. Everybody got their small investment back.

A full audit revealed that for the first nine months, we just barely kept afloat. But over the next year, we brought in $1 million in revenue. In terms

of today's money, that sounds like peanuts, but in the early 1970's, that was unheard of.

My partners, in their infinite wisdom, had let me run with the ball, as long as it looked as though I wasn't going to make it. They then decided that, if our business was going to draw millions of dollars, that they had better take the job of signing checks away from me. Although I was not bitter, and the success of Grand Prix wrestling continued, it had hurt my feelings and cast shadows on my honesty and integrity.

Here are just a few of the incidents meant to discredit me: in shows where I could not attend, they would undermine my policy, telling arena managers, newspapermen, and others that I was not in charge anymore. On our television show, they would go against the guidelines of the clean, decent, respectable action that had been our hallmark. While I was away for five weeks in Japan and Hawaii, they had decided to run a Forum show. Since I was conveniently away, they requested the athletic commission change the licensee to another partner.

They said I was still a partner, but not the promoter anymore.

I told Mad Dog, "I can't take this anymore. I'm not having fun, and I want out."

He said, "Me, too."

Mad Dog asked, "What you going to do? Where are you going to go?"

I said, "Probably call Vince McMahon, how about you?"

Maurice said, "I'll take a short break, and then call Verne in Minneapolis. Let the bastards stick this business up their asses."

We sold the other partners our shares for $25,000 each. After we made that deal, I felt like a great weight had been lifted off of my shoulders.

When we sold our shares, I told Mad Dog “we got out just in time. Within a year, these guys will be out of business.”

Almost to the day, that prophecy came true.

A successful promoter has to have the welfare of his wrestlers in mind in order to acquire their goodwill. The same goes for television connections and television people; you need their cooperation, just as you do from arena managers, vendors, etc.

Everything comes into play: publicity, media relations, even the people that transport and put up the ring. That may seem insignificant, but I have arrived at shows where the ring was missing! Once in Michigan, we had to wrestle on gym mats.

The lighting, the heat in the building, or the air-conditioning, the entrances into the ring for your wrestlers, or the exits for the same wrestlers, the protection of those wrestlers coming in and going out, public relations, and much more. If only one of those things is not right, it can kill your promotion, and deny you success.

-12-

I don’t want to give the reader the impression that my career in wrestling ended when we sold our interest in Grand Prix Wrestling. In fact, I was in and out of the wrestling business for another 12 years, until 1987.

I took time off along the way to own the hotel in my hometown of Mansonville, Québec. Let me tell you that for a guy that was trying to stop drinking, to have a 34 room, 100-year-old hotel where, as a 14-year-old boy, you had your first beer, well, it was not a very good idea.

I was trying to juggle wrestling for the WWWF, running the hotel, bar, and dance hall, and drinking at the same time.

I lost the hotel, let my bookings with Vince McMahon, Senior, expire, and I let my marriage to Van, my second wife and the mother of our three girls, dissolve. I must state categorically that the fault for my divorce was all mine, and that Van was willing to persevere with me, even though we did not live together as man and wife. She was a great lady.

I decided, at 44 years of age, to change careers. I moved out to Red Deer, Alberta, where I worked on pipeline construction as a laborer.

On October 2, 1981, I stepped out of a telephone booth in front of the Laborers' Union in Edmonton, where I had been working on the pipeline. I said to myself, "This is the last day I am ever going to drink any kind of alcohol."

I never have, and it has been 31 years. "Dieu, Merci."

After working at pipeline construction for a year or so, where I was making pretty good money, I was in between jobs and didn't really know how long I would be off. So I jumped in my truck and was going to Georgia by way of Texas and Louisiana.

Near Padre Island, I decided to call my friend Vince McMahon, Senior, to sort of apologize to him for my drinking having gotten in the way of my wrestling work.

When I said that, he said. "Well, Paul, that must've been a problem for you, but your drinking was never a problem for us here. It never interfered with your work in the ring. When do you want to start?"

When I said that, he said. "Well, Paul, that must've been a problem for you, but your drinking was never a problem for us here. It never interfered with your work in the ring. When do you want to start?"

Right then, he gave me some dates for the next month, and I worked for him for couple more years. Then, slowly, I became more and more inactive, taking only occasional matches.

At age 50, at the behest of my friend Killer Kowalski, I had my last match in St. Albans, Vermont.

I am not an overly religious man, but everything that I have lived through and survived makes me believe in the power of love and prayer.

That emanated from my mother Marguerite. She had always told me that in life, all you need is love and prayer, and if you have love in your heart, every good deed you do becomes a prayer. You don't have to get down your

knees to pray (but she did), just love, smile, and do good things, and you will be repaid a hundredfold.

Chapter 10

The Love of my Life

-1-

Before I really get too far off into forgotten stories, I must tell you one more thing of major importance that happened to me on Highway 105.

This is a big one.

This is where I met, and married, the love of my life, Deana Marie Goddard. Deana is a Newport graduate of North Country High School, class of 1969. We tied the knot on Darling Hill, overlooking the international lake, Memphremagog.

It's also important here to elaborate a little bit about Deana's background, if only to let the reader have an idea of her strength of character.

You need strength of character to be able to help in the rehabilitation of a broken-down, 55-year-old, retired, professional-globetrotting, twice-married, twice-divorced "wrassler."

Deana was 41 years old, had never been married, and her background had been as a Staff Sergeant in the United States Marine Corps.

She had recently lost her father, for whom she had given up her military career when he became ill.

I myself had also recently lost my mother, who I had been living with me since she had lost her husband, my father, who she had outlived by 11 years.

Deana and her best friend, Carol Bonneau, had started a dented can store; that's another term for a discount food store. The store was in the little border town of North Troy, Vermont, on Highway 105, about a quarter of a mile from the Canadian border.

My sister, Vivian Vachon, had been a professional wrestler herself, and had, at the time, along with her daughter Julie, been living with my mother and me.

Vivian would frequently cross the border and shop at the dented can store. Every time she came back from that store, she would say “Paul, you should go there once in a while. There’s a couple of good looking girls that work there. It would be nice for you to have a girlfriend.”

At that time, I never gave it a second thought.

One night, my sister Vivian was home and could stay with my mother. It was my custom, when I had a chance, to go to the local bar in Mansonville, Quebec.

Since I had quit drinking, like, 10 years before, the only activity I found for myself was playing the video poker machines.

It must had made me look sort of anti-social, sitting there in a bar, not drinking, and not really talking to anybody, but always chewing on a big, fat, slimy cigar.

I must’ve looked lonely, because, out of nowhere, this good-looking brunette came to talk to me and said, “I bet I could smoke that cigar, too, if you let me play that video poker machine with you.”

Flattered, I said, “Why would you want to do that?”

“Well,” she said, “I spent all my money in another poker machine. My girlfriend Carol has a lot of credits left, but won’t share with me.”

So I said “okay.”

To thank me, she gave me a great big kiss on the lips, the same lips that had been chewing on that slimy cigar.

Now, I had been chewing on slimy cigars for the past 30 years, so they didn’t phase me a bit.

But it made her sick to her stomach and she rushed out to throw up. So, for better or for worse, this was my first impression of, and impromptu

introduction to, the girl that was to become my life partner and the love of my life.

-2-

Shortly after that, my favorite sister and godchild, Vivian, along with her 10-year-old daughter, Julie, got killed by a drunk driver.

Shortly after that, maybe two weeks later, my mother, Marguerite, succumbed to liver cancer.

I found myself, in a very short time, alone again, after having kept house with the two women that I had loved most in my life.

Julie, my niece, also was gone.

But take my word for it- all three of them are still alive in my heart and will be for eternity.

After a time of feeling sorry for myself, I decided “The hell with this, I’m going to get out of this house and go find the dented can store where those girls are.” My sister, Vivian, was always trying to match me up with them, not knowing, of course, that I had already met one of them.

Under the pretense of wanting to buy some dented cans of tomatoes and tomato purée to make spaghetti sauce, but really wanting to hook up with the girls, I went there. What a surprise it was to me when I found out that the girls were there.

I said, “Wow, you girls are here. My sister, Vivian, always wanted me to come in here to meet you girls.”

They said, “Is that why you came?”

So, me, not wanting to look too obvious, I said “No, no. I really came for canned tomatoes to make spaghetti sauce.” Because I said that, I wound up with my Ford Crown Victoria’s trunk full of tomato cans and puree.

They explained that “At the dented can outlet in Connecticut where we get this stuff, they don’t really let us pick just what we want. They sell it to us by the boxful, and a lot of the boxes have tomatoes, and tomato puree, and

various tomato products. So really you are a godsend to us. You can have them all free."

Needless to say, I went back there often.

-3-

After a while, it became apparent to Carol that I came there more to visit with her business partner, Deana, than to get dented cans of tomatoes, especially since I already had enough to last for a long while. She was mad at me for a while, but that was a long time ago. Thank God, we are all still friends.

The failure of my first two conjugal experiences had been due to many, many different reasons, but one reason stands out and is definitely the overriding one: wrestlers are never home to keep the home fire burning.

I had promised myself never to get married again, but I figured things could be different now that I wasn't on the road so much.

Also, I figured with a bighearted woman like my Deana, everything would be all right. So my plan was this: being that my previous marriages had faltered because of too much traveling, why don't I take Deana on an extended trip?

And if we come back, and she hasn't killed me yet, I'll know that it's going to work and I'll propose to her.

In retrospect, that plan sounds kind of asinine, sort of like jumping from the frying pan into the fire, you might say. And to complicate things a little bit, Deana, for a few years, had been a caregiver to a mentally challenged individual in his mid-30s. His communication skills were limited to a few grunts and groans that I sure as hell didn't understand, but Deana, my wife-to-be, understood perfectly.

On what, to my mind, was a pre-honeymoon trip, he came along. To preserve his privacy, I will refer to him as Mr. G.

This guy was 20 years younger, taller than me, and with the strength, when he got agitated, of three men like me.

A 6,000 mile camping trip out West, to find out if you want to marry this Marine Staff Sergeant, probably doesn't sound like a very good idea, but, as it turned out, it was a life-changing experience.

It enabled me to realize what an unselfish, loving, caring person she was.

There is a lot more to say and write about that trip, but for now I will interject that we have been happily married for 20 years and I love her.

That month-long camping trip took us through the provinces of Québec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia, traveling the famous TransCanada Highway, camping each night at campgrounds strung along that road provided to us, and all travelers, free of charge by the Canadian government.

Before we got back, I was a little bit apprehensive about how Mr. G would take to it.

But, because of the good care provided to him by Staff Sergeant Deana Goddard, he behaved really well.

When we got to Alberta, we visited with Donna Black, my ex-wife, who greeted us with open arms. So did the rest of the Black family, especially her brother Chester and his wife Doris.

While in Alberta, the three of us attended the Calgary Stampede, which is billed as the biggest rodeo on earth. On that trip we also went swimming in the hot springs of Banff National Park, and visited Jasper National Park and the beautiful Canadian Rockies. We also saw Lake Louise, and went into the fruit-growing Okanagan Valley of southern British Columbia.

Every night we would camp out in two tents, one for us and one for Mr. G. Deana was surprised at first that, everywhere we went along the way, perfect strangers would come up to say hello to me, as if they had known me all their lives.

Which of course they did, since they recognized me as "Butcher" Vachon from TV wrestling. Sometimes some of them would call me Mad Dog Vachon. Sometimes they still do that, but that's all right, Mad Dog tells me that sometimes they call him "Butcher".

I really don’t know how that could be, since I’m so much better looking than him.

Of course, all that recognition surprised Deana, but now she’s used to it.

But back then, she had never been a wrestling fan. Indeed, she had never even seen a wrestling match. It felt strange to her.

Mr. G on the other hand, it didn’t impress him at all.

In British Columbia, we also stopped at Radium Hot Springs, then traveled south to Montana into spectacular Glacier National Park. That is where we had our first, you might say, nerve-racking event.

We had been traveling on beautiful valley roads going around the mountains in the park. Sometimes going to the right around the mountain, sometimes going to the left. After a while, we would make a game out of it and say “Guess what side we’re going to go around this time, right or left?”

That was fun and also beautiful. Then we started heading towards a really big and high mountain.

We were about to play our game of guessing which side we were going on, when we started reading road signs that said “Highway to the Sun.”

That’s when we realized that we were not going around it, but over, climbing and climbing, always higher and higher.

Now, up until then, I had never doubted the capacity of my old thousand-dollar Ford Crown Victoria. But now I held my breath, climbing up and up, until we got to the summit of the mountain, at about 14,000 feet high, on that highway to the sun.

Then I let out a sigh of relief and made the mistake of saying out loud, “Now that we made it up here, I hope we have enough brake fluid in the brake cylinder to make it down this mountain.”

That’s when I saw the terror in Deana’s eyes.

Then, as if to make matters worse, I said “Well, if we don’t, I can always put the automatic transmission in the lower drive.”

She never spoke to me until we got to the bottom. By that time it was too dark to put up the tent, so she and Mr. G silently slept in the car. Because the car was full of camping stuff, and there was no room for me, I was relegated to a sleeping bag on a picnic table.

For a day or so after that, she had nothing to say to me, good or bad. However, that didn't last long, because we were in the beautiful state of Montana, next to a nice babbling brook with crystal-clear water where you could see the trout swimming around.

So we got us a fishing pole, then Deana herself quickly caught a few trout. That seemed to make her real happy, and her good humor was back, so that made me real happy, too.

So then she handed me the pole and said, "Now, you fish. I will cook."

And she did that as if she knew she was auditioning for the job of wife number three. She wrapped the trout in aluminum foil, with elementary spices like garlic, salt, pepper, chopped onions, and a bit of butter.

I am sure my mother would be mad at me now when I say that was the best fish I have eaten, before or since.

I guess she was making up for getting mad at me for coming down that 14,000 foot Highway to the Sun Road without much use of the brakes.

Of course, she could not have known that she was in a trial run for me to find out if I really wanted to get legally married again. She might not have come along if she had.

After that nice camping/fishing spot in southern Montana, I'm now thinking that that babbling brook was just south of Bozeman, Montana.

The next day we attended a once-a-year weekend flea market-shades of things to come for us- where hundreds of vendors came from all over the West to sell their wares. There was lots of horsey and cow stuff that many thousands of people had come to buy.

On the next day, we hopped along to an Indian campground where a real Indian teepee made of animal skins was a permanent fixture. I think that

served as a home for the guy that rented us our campsite.

It’s funny sometimes, as you travel, how many inconsequential and trivial things happen to you, like maybe a sign that you read and forget about.

Well, this one I didn’t forget. Although it could be considered dirty words and I have endeavored to keep, as much as possible, dirty words out of my writings, I have here to make an exception for two dirty words.

So here goes. The sign was posted in the men’s room in a beautiful picturesque valley campground, situated between the Gallatin Range and the Madison Range of the Rocky Mountains, near a place called Big Sky.

It read:

18 years later, every time that sign comes to mind, it still makes me chuckle. That sign was explicit and to the point, and it did the job it was

intended to do, but seemed funny and odd among the giant pristine western mountains.

I have since then seen other signs telling me, and everybody else, that facilities were out of order, but none of them have stuck to my memory, or made me laugh like that one did. I now ask you, the reader, to forgive my little bit of toilet humor. I just had to let it leak into this narrative.

We camped there for a few days, traveling back and forth every day to visit Yellowstone National Park. I could really write a book about that spectacular place, but that's been done, and, certainly, by better writers than I.

Still, I must tell you a little bit of what I saw, like the buffaloes roaming free, elk, deer, mountain goats, also beautiful geysers, including Old Faithful, and many other wondrous things.

-4-

In order to tell about my life after professional wrestling, I found it necessary to recount what kind of life I had up until I quit wrestling.

While doing that, it came to me that both of my lives, before and after professional wrestling, have been spent on the road. They were very different lives, but both of them were definitely spent traveling. The early years had been recounted at length in my trilogy of books called When Wrestling was Real.

As I write this fourth book, it occurs to me that all these books of mine could have been titled On The Road, if only another French-Canadian by the name of Jack Kerouac had not already written his wonderful book about the cultural revolution by that name.

So it's only logical, proper, and foreseeable that I would propose to the woman with whom I wanted to spend the rest of my life after professional wrestling while I was driving down the road- and that's exactly what happened.

By the time we left Yellowstone National Park and were heading back east to Québec and Vermont, I was thinking to myself, "Where has this girl been

all my life?”

But, knowing that she was 41, was a confirmed bachelorette, and me, a 55-year-old has-been of a wrestler with no prospect of gainful employment in view, I had cold feet about asking her to marry me.

But after we had visited a few more Western states, national parks, and monuments, including Mount Rushmore and all those stone faces, I decided to courage up and ask her to marry me.

She said, sort of surprised, “Are you sure?”

And I said, sort of surprised myself, “Yes”, then she said “yes.”

And that, my friends, happened on the road somewhere in the middle of South Dakota at night. I had been so engrossed in the moment of proposing to her that I had forgotten we were not alone in the car.

When I shouted out my joy and hollered “hooray”, another voice surfaced from the darkness of the back seat and also hollered out, and I quote, “ole rraatt taboogie gee.”

In Mr. G’s language, that meant “Old Butcher’s gonna make out tonight with Dee.”

In another week we were home, and the first thing that Deana said to her mother, Ruth, reminded me of an old-time song that I had heard on the radio as a kid. It went like this: “Ma, he wants to marry me.”

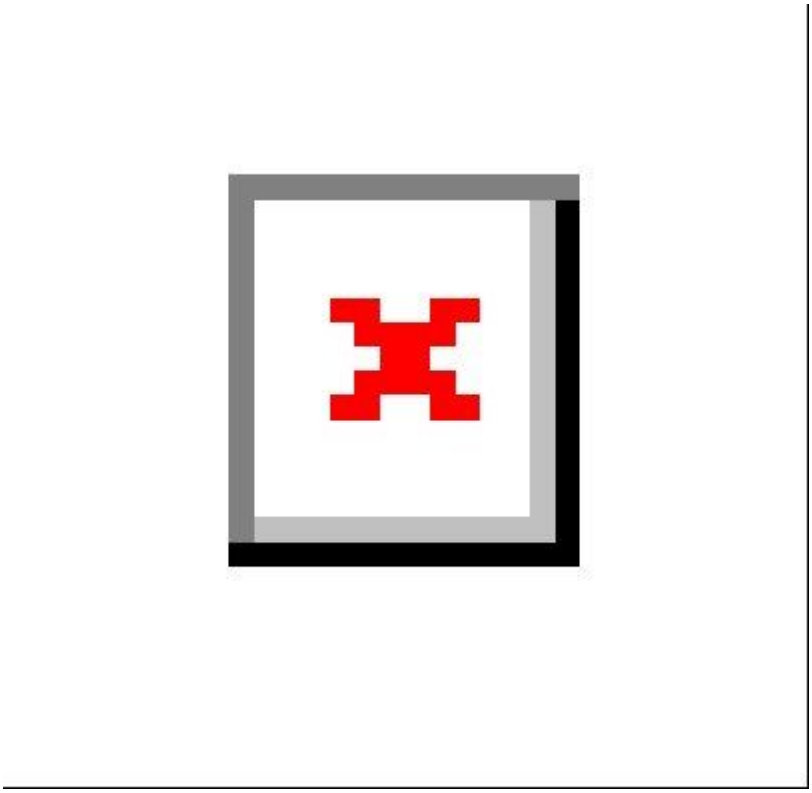
Ruth, bless her soul, said “Do it, girl- what you waiting for?”

My wife-to-be, Deana, had been raised in an old country farmhouse, built alongside a Vermont country road, at the bottom of a hill called Darling Hill.

She spent her youth cavorting with neighboring farm kids, or, by herself, climbing to the top of Darling Hill. From there, she would have the most beautiful view of the Lake Memphremagog, which spans the US-Canada border.

She told me that, as a young girl, she used to daydream about getting married there on Darling Hill.

So we did, the two of us, standing on a rock, surrounded by family and friends.



As if to make sure it was truly an international event, after the ceremony, everybody got in their cars and drove across the border to Canada, where my sister-in-law Elga, and her husband, my brother Arthur, lived, and where the reception was being held.

In retrospect, it seems to me that the road trip I had planned as a fact-finding voyage to see if the two of us (really the three of us) were compatible enough for us to get married had worked out pretty good. The two of us decided “Hell, let’s keep this going”, and we have.

Dee and I make an annual trip to The Cauliflower Alley Club, a gathering of ex-wrestlers and invited guests in Las Vegas. On the way, we tour the country. There is still a long road ahead of us.

After high school, I went to National Life Insurance Company in Montpelier, Vermont, to work. After two years, I had been enjoying my independence, but I was wondering what was on the other side of Camel's Hump, and beyond. I wanted to travel and leave home, but where would I go, what would I do, how would I afford it?

The next day I went to the Recruiting Station downtown and walked into the first office I saw. The Marine Corps recruiter answered all my questions, and I answered all of his.

Three months later, I was getting off the bus in Parris Island, South Carolina. The minute my foot hit the pavement, I realized that I was in for the adventure of a life time. And what a life lesson it was!

What a culture shock I had. You have to remember that I was raised in the Northeast Kingdom, where the biggest city I ever went to was Burlington. When I lived in Montpelier I would go to the Maine coast for camping trips, but never too far from home.

There we were, from all over the United States, standing on the line and not saying a word. It would not matter how rich or poor we were, where we came from, or what our opinions were. What would matter would be the way a group of 60 girls came together to spend 3 life changing-months together and forming a bond that would last a life time.

SEMPER FI…

Chapter 11

My Beloved Luna

-1-

I‘m thinking that the time has come for me to put on paper my thoughts and feelings about the passing of my daughter. Gertrude a.k.a. “Luna” Vachon died Friday, August 27, 2010, the victim of heart failure, at age 48.

At this point I would like to acknowledge, although belatedly, all the people from around the world, friends, acquaintances and even strangers, that have sent me messages of condolence and sympathy. I’m sorry for taking so long to respond, but this is the earliest I could get myself to do this.

I called my daughter Gert, and she would get mad at me for calling her that, since everyone else called her Trudy. Then she realized that, from me, Gert was entirely a term of endearment.

Luna, for most of her life, struggled with the ravages that bipolar disorder can bring. But that had not stopped her from being the best that she could be, not only as a person, but as a daughter, sister, and mother, as well as the best in her profession.

However, I was as proud of her for being the kind, generous person that she was, as for following in the footsteps of her father, “The Butcher”, her uncle, “Mad Dog”, and her beloved aunt, Vivian Vachon, who starred in the movie “Wrestling Queen”.

Gert was my daughter, in fact and in love, never mind the fact that I became her father when she was already four years old. I was the only father she ever knew and, for her, that was that, and I feel the same way.

WRESTLING QUEEN
the first inside look at the brutal world of wrestling
SHE'S BIG
SHE'S
BEAUTIFUL
SHE'LL DO
ANYTHING
TO WIN
MENACING
GIANTS OF
WRESTLING
WHO LIVE
TO KILL
EACH OTHER
STARRING
VIVIAN VACHON
AS "THE WRESTLING QUEEN"
WITH/
"COWBOY" BILL WATTS,
"MAD DOG" VACHON,
"BUTCHER" VACHON, "GRIZZLY" SMITH,
DANNY HODGE, MARIE "FIFI" LAVERNE,
JEAN "THE GIANT" FERRE

I have all my life felt very proud of all my children, all seven of them, natural or otherwise. Marc, Pierre, Andre, Susan, Trudy, Monique, Paulette; I love them all.

I am, however, guilty of not telling them that often enough. For that I ask forgiveness. One thing I know now is that it's hard when parents outlive their children.

There were all kinds of rumors and false reports about Gert's death. There was the inevitable talk of suicide, drug overdose, etc.

The investigators, however, found all kinds of prescribed medicine in her cabinets, but none of those were deemed the immediate cause of death. She was found dead in her mother's house. She had been eating pizza, suffered heart failure, and died face down in the pizza.

Personally, I can't help but think that, at 48 years old, to die of heart failure, maybe it was caused by the accumulation of thousands and thousands of pills that she had been plied with through the years to control her bipolar disorder.

My friend and collaborator Greg Oliver, of "SLAM! Wrestling" wrote on that fateful day:

Luna Vachon has died. She was 48, according to family. She was at her mother's house, and was found dead this morning of causes that have not yet been determined. The news comes just a short while after a house fire consumed her home and destroyed her wrestling memorabilia. She was staying at her mother's home after the fire.

Gertrude Angelle Vachon, "Trudy" to friends, was one of the most colorful and eccentric woman wrestlers of all time. She was always billed as the daughter of Paul "The Butcher" Vachon.

Although biologically she was not his daughter, he always considered her as his daughter, even after splitting with her mother, Van, which was Butcher's second marriage.

Trudy arrived in his life when she was only four years old. “I taught my daughter Luna how to wrestle, and also sent her to the wrestling school run by the Fabulous Moolah, after whom she patterned her wrestling style and personality. Luna became one of the most famous and recognizable lady wrestlers in wrestling history,” wrote her father in this second autobiography.

(Photo courtesy of Dr. Mike Lano)

As a student, she was very much interested in, very much involved in, really, really wanting to be the best. 'She had high hopes,' said Lillian Ellison, 'that The Fabulous Moolah is back.' It was for more than that that Luna named Moolah her Angel for wrestling.

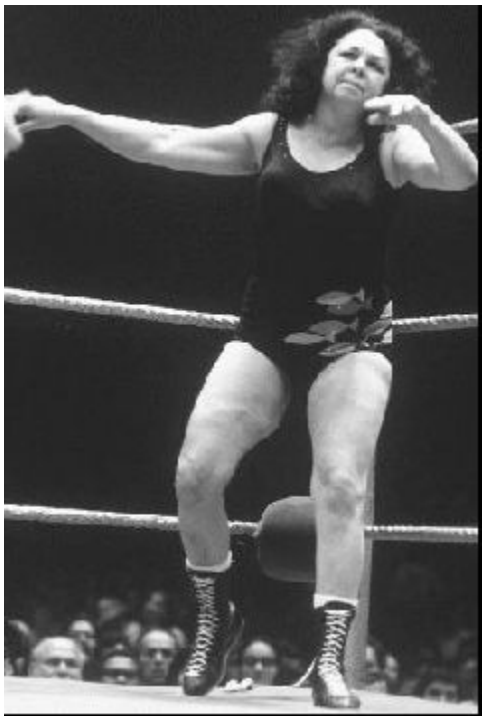
Luna would also credit Judy Martin and Velvet McIntyre for teaching her how to throw a proper punch.

In an interview from 2000, Butcher Vachon expanded on his adopted daughter's exposure to the wrestling business.

"She was 13, maybe 14 years old, and she used to come to the wrestling matches. I was, at the time, working for the World Wrestling Federation, when Vince, Senior was running it.

(Photo courtesy of Dr. Mike Lano)

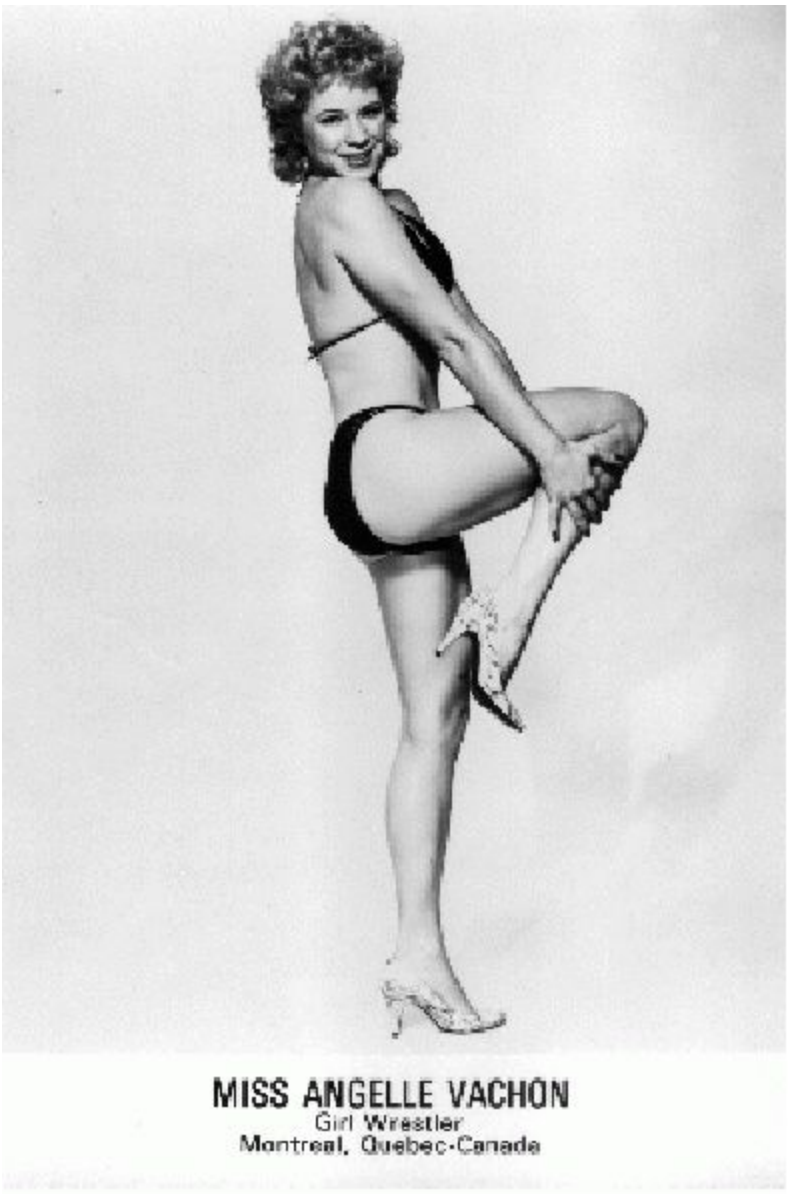
"We were living down in Connecticut," he recalled. "We'd go early and get to the wrestling building in late afternoon. The place would be open, and the ring was up, but with no people in the place. We'd get up in the ring, and I'd show her. Then, inevitably, some of the guys would start wandering in and they'd help me start putting her through her paces.



“She could’ve been anything. By that I mean that she could’ve had a career in so many other fields. She was a beautiful girl and very intelligent; smart, good-looking, of course, like her dad, don’t you know.

“Her idol was my sister, Vivian, who was also a wrestler. All she ever wanted to do was wrestle.

“Trudy had been watching her, in a sense, since she was four or five years old. That’s all she ever did. I told her she was a lunatic for wanting to be a professional wrestler, a beautiful girl like her. I have always thought that wrestling was not a business for women. It’s not even a good business for men.



(Photo courtesy of Dr. Mike Lano)

“I grew up wanting to be a part of this business so badly,” remembered Luna in a WWE.com interview. “My family discouraged me at first. My aunt Vivian was a wrestler, so they knew the kind of toll that wrestling could take on a woman’s body.

(Photo courtesy of Dr. Mike Lano)

“I know that that didn’t stop me, no.

“It was in my blood, and all I wanted to do was become a wrestler.”

Her look became her calling card. There were the strange haircuts, the tattoos, and the gravelly voice, which was legit. All that was Luna.

-3-

Another thought has come to me of late, since I have let myself think about the passing of my daughter Luna. That is, what role, if any, did steroids have to do with her demise? God and I know that she would’ve done anything to succeed in the wrestling business, although I never spoke to her about using steroids.

I can’t help but think that steroids were prevalent in the wrestling business in Vince McMahon, Junior’s era, ever since he took over the family business from my friend and drinking partner Vincent McMahon, Senior. I believe that Junior encouraged his athletes to use steroids. As a matter of fact, it definitely looked like he used steroids himself when I saw him take his shirt off on TV.

When I was in the business, none of it was around, or, if there was, I wasn’t aware of it. Me, my drug of choice was beer.

Now that I think more closely about it, when I was in California, in the late 70's, Don Fargo was always bragging about his body, and how good he looked for a man his age. What he was on then, he called Dianabol. I remember thinking back then, "If it makes him look better, then more power to him." However, I'm not so sure that it enhanced his performance in the ring.

I don't know that that's what caused Luna's death, but if it was, I sure as hell would not blame Vince, Junior, or anybody else for Trudy's passing. After all, that is part of life. It's also inevitable, knowing that, and having said that, let me tell you, it sure as hell does not make it easier on parents that outlive any of their children.

Performance-enhancing potions, made up of special secret ingredients, have been around forever. I'm sure Ulysses, and then guys like Samson, and others, used their own kind of steroids. What about the Roman gladiators, 2000 years ago, and who is to say that Jesse Owens, or Jim Thorpe didn't have something in their diet that made them run faster? And, if they did, hurray for them.

We invest all kinds of money on our children to send them to the best schools in the world, so that they can get a jump on everybody, and make more money than anybody else. We don't call that cheating. We want our national sports athletes, football and baseball players to do well. So let's not condemn them for what path they choose to get there.

I have been a risk taker, all my life, when it comes to the wrestling business. For instance, I never hesitated, at the age of 19, when Detroit promoters Harry Light and Bert Ruby proposed that I grow a beard, shave my head, and become a Russian villain called Nikolai Zollotoff. That was quite a risk for a teenager. It was also a risk when, at the age of 22, I took my family on a round-the-world wrestling tour that included Hawaii, Australia, New Zealand, the Indian subcontinent, Europe, and Great Britain.

It was also a risk when I launched an acting career in Bombay, India, and made movies with the famous Indian actor Dara Sing, who was also a

famous wrestler.

All of those things were pretty risky, but I never regretted those career moves. I've been pretty lucky in my risk-taking, and I have always admired Vince McMahon, Junior, for his risk taking. In particular, that time in early 1980s when I was getting married and Vince said "why don't we do it at one of our Madison Square Garden shows?"

My fiancée at first agreed, then had second thoughts, and backed out of the wedding altogether. I was all bummed out when I told Vince, but, to his credit, Junior said "don't worry about it, we'll do it on TV" and I said "but she don't want to do it at all." So Vince said "don't worry about it, Paul, we will hire an actress." He did and the rest is history.

I have, in previous writings, described that wild, wild melee, and I will not do it again here, except to underline that Junior was a risk taker and that he showed that over and over again. That outrageous episode of Tuesday Night Titans is also to his credit, that his risk paid off in the making and success of the USA cable Channel.

My friend George “The Animal” Steele, who himself had, his entire career, been guilty of wild and outrageous behavior, was present and took part in my “wedding”. He said to Vince Junior “You’re not gonna show that, are you?” George, who was personal friends of both Senior and Junior, swears that it was the “wedding” that lit up Vince’s star and the TV wrestling business, pay per view and all.

I guess success makes you bold. But whatever made Vince McMahon, Junior take his pants down and let someone kiss his ass in front of a worldwide television audience of millions, it was a lousy risk to take. I am having trouble reconciling myself with the idea that my friend, the billionaire, lost his way when he did that.

However, I would be guilty of ungratefulness if I did not mention that when Luna needed help for hospitalization and rehab, Vince Junior paid for it. When she, at the relatively young age of 48, passed away, he also paid for all funeral expenses.

Thank you, Vince.

Chapter 12

Fighting for my Life

-1-

In 1992, Deana and I were driving back from Florida, she noticed I had a rash growing on my chest and stomach. We never worried too much about it, thinking it would go away, but instead it kept getting worse.

So when we got back home she said, “You’re going to the doctor!” So I did. The doctor gave me something to clear it up. That didn’t work, so he said, “Let’s see what a blood test will show.” The blood test showed that there was cancer in my blood.

My family doctor said, “We’re in luck, because we have, at our hospital here locally, the best cancer surgeon available. I’m trying to reach him right now. When you get home, call me, and I’ll let you know what luck I have.”

When I got home, I called him back. He said, “Dr. Beaudoin will see you tomorrow morning at the hospital. You have to fast until then. He is going to perform a colonoscopy on you.”

It was about 10 o’clock the next morning when I met Dr. Beaudoin. First thing he said was, “I know who you are, Paul, I live in Abercorn, just over the mountain from you. How’s the Mad Dog?”

I said, “He’s fine. Probably better than me- he don’t have cancer.”

He said, “Don’t worry about that, I will take care of it.”

Then they put me on my back on what seemed to me like a maternity table, with my feet in stirrups.

“All right,” Dr. Beaudoin said before our study, “I’d like to know if you’d like to see this on TV, we can put you to sleep but it doesn’t hurt to watch. We will keep you awake and you can see everything that goes on inside of your colon.”

So I said “Let’s try it, that will be cool.”

Not only did I see the probe going up inside of me, but I also got a running commentary from one of the foremost cancer doctors in the world.

It went like this: “We’re going up you: we’ve just passed your prostate. We’re going up, up, it’s all nice and clear. No polyps going up, all clear now.

“We’re going back down again. Everything looks good coming down.

“Haw**,** there it is. There’s your tumor, as big as your fist, from this image. It definitely has to come out.”

Then he pulled the camera out of me. Then he said, “The attendants will take you back to your room. I’ll see you in a little bit.”

About an hour after that, he came up to my room.

He said, “You saw the cancer, it’s got to come out. “When do you want to do it?”

I said, “When can you do it. He said, “We can do it Monday morning.”

So I said, “Monday morning it is then.”

Then he said, “You have to be here tomorrow morning, and spend the weekend in the hospital, so we can prep you.”

So I asked him my chances of surviving, right away, without blinking an eye.

He said, “50-50.”

So I got dressed, and went down to the parking lot where Deana was waiting for me all day. In a matter fact manner, she said, “What did the doctor say?”

I said, “I’ve got good news and bad news.”

She said, “Give me the bad news first.”

I said, “I have colon cancer. The good news is they are going to take it out Monday morning.”

The next morning, when I came into the hospital, they gave me enemas, laxatives, everything in the world to clean out my intestines.

The operation was a success. They kept me in the hospital for another week or so, taking blood tests every day. After a week they said, “Your blood is clear of cancer, but Dr. Beaudoin has prescribed two hours a week of chemotherapy, until further notice.”

I sat there, two hours a week, for 10 months, along with 3 other people, getting chemo intravenously. I made friends with them. I got to know their names, their children’s names. Some came and went.

Finally, one day, they said that, “Dr. Beaudoin said you have had enough. Go home, and don’t come back till we call you.”

I think it was three years before Dr. Beaudoin called me. He said, “You have to come and see me.”

When I did, he said, “I’m happy to see you. It’s a miracle, you know, that you’re still alive.”

I said, “What do you mean, it’s a miracle? You told me I had a 50-50 chance.”

He said, “Yeah, well, I lied.”

“Why?” I asked.

He said, “I have found, through the years, that the people I told that they had 15 to 20% chance of survival, they didn’t do so well. They gave up. The biggest reason you’re still around, and survived this thing, was because of your attitude, your good humor and your attitude.

“You know the three people that you were taking chemo with? Two of them are dead.”

Years later, I don’t know, maybe three, four years after that, I saw Dr. Beaudoin and his wife at the start of a canoe race that Deana and her friend,

Carol were taking part in.

He saw me first.

He said, “I told you it was a miracle. You’re still around, aren’t you?”

-2-

Later in the 90’s, as we were doing fairs, I started coughing more often than usual. Of course, I had been chain-smoking cigars for years, so I decided to stop smoking for a while. But the cough persisted, and it became rather troublesome to carry on a conversation with people while coughing all the time.

I tried all kinds of home remedies, like cough syrup, cough drops, and the like, but nothing helped. So, finally, I went to see old Doc Bouchard in Stanstead, Québec.

He checked my throat, but couldn’t see anything. He said, “I’m giving you this special syrup that will stop any cough, but I suggest that you go see your own doctor and have him do some more tests.”

So I did. He did some blood tests. And then he sent me to see another top cancer doctor and radiation expert, Dr. Nabeeb, who promptly diagnosed throat cancer. Specifically, cancer of the tonsils, so I figured, Well, that’ll be easy. You can cut the tonsils out.”

But, instead, he prescribed forty radiation treatments, one every working day. That meant that every working day I would have to leave Deana at the fair, and go to the hospital for my treatment.

Radiation doesn’t hurt when you get it, but your throat gets progressively more sore, tight, and inflamed, not only during the eight weeks of radiation, but for months after that.

I lived on liquids, and very soft foods, like oatmeal, eggs over easy, puddings and the like. I could not eat anything unless it was liquefied, the results of which was that I lost 60 pounds.

Mind you, I had it to lose. I went from 290 pounds to 230 pounds. That was about 10 years ago, and I'm still 230 pounds, which if truth be known, is probably still too much….but, what the hell, I'm cancer-free, above ground and it's good to be alive.

-3-

Deana and I were at the Orleans County Fair, in Barton, Vermont, when, one morning, I sat up out of bed and found I had trouble breathing. Not knowing what was going on, I laid back down.

I could breathe easily again when I did that. But I said to myself, "Well, I can't stay lying down all day."

But when I got up, I was short of breath again. After seeing me do that a few times, Deana said, "What's the matter with you?"

I said, "I can't breathe when I stand up."

So she said, "You got to go see the doctor, right now, today."

The doctor sent me to the hospital in Montréal to have my heart x-rayed. They told me I had a bent aortic valve in my heart (which is something I had been diagnosed with by the Athletic Commission doctors years ago. Actually, it was a birth defect. They also said in those days that it was all right, as long as it didn't give me any trouble.) Now, after all those years, it was giving me trouble. I would have to have it replaced, but they couldn't do it right away, because they had a backlog of operations to do at Notre Dame Hospital in Montréal.

In the meantime, they said, "We can clean it up a little bit, put you on some blood thinner and send you home. If the shortness of breath comes back, then it will become an emergency and we will perform open heart surgery and replace your aortic valve."

That is what they did, two weeks later, when my shortness of breath came back. They gave me a choice between an artificial valve and a pig valve.

With a man-made artificial valve, I would have to go to have it checked and have blood tests taken every three months. With a pig's valve, I would have to go have it checked once a year, so knowing that I wouldn't go every three months, being on the road and all, I picked the pig's valve.

I thought it was ironic, and rather appropriate. All my career, French-speaking wrestling fans, when they felt I was being dirty in the ring, would, in unison, call me "Vachon—Cochon," which even English-speaking people know means – Vachon the PIG.

So I said to myself that if they called me that, now it would be at least partly true.

It also brought back memories of when I came back from my world tour that lasted five years, and my brother Mad Dog wanted to give me a new name- Paul The Pig. The man-made artificial valve was guaranteed for life (however long that would be for someone with an artificial valve in their heart), and the pig valve that I chose was guaranteed for 15 years.

So far, so good.

-4-

Twice I was cured from cancer. The second time, however, the 40 radiation treatments that cured me of throat cancer so weakened my left jawbone that, after a few years, I had to have it replaced. That was done by three surgeons in an 11 hour operation. It was actually a bone transplant.

So, where do you get a bone to transplant into your jaw? Well, mine they got out of my shoulder blade.

They kept me in the hospital for about a week after the operation then sent me home. They said "Come back in about a week, then we'll have a look at it and let you know how successful our reconstruction work was."

When I went back, all three of the surgeons that performed the operation looked and stuck their hands and scopes in my mouth, and then, with smug,

self-satisfied looks on their faces said, “Mr. Vachon, once in a while we do a very good job around here, and yours was the best ever.”

Actually, I thought my face looked crooked, but, after a while, it straightened itself out.

And I’m still good looking, or so the girls tell me.

-5-

Three or four years ago, as I went to see my family doctor for my regular yearly check-up, he said, following me into his office, “You’re walking a little bit bent over. Are you like that all the time? Does it hurt?”

I said, “Yes, and yes, I’m bent and it hurts, what can you do for me?”

After he examined me, and sent me for x-rays, he said “Your back is all screwed up with arthritis, and your vertebrae are all worn out.

“There is an operation that we can do, but I don’t recommend it. In it, they fuse your vertebrates together. Sometimes it works, but too many times it doesn’t. And then they have to redo it again.

“That’s why I don’t recommend it. (I sort of agreed with him, because too many former wresters had it done and it didn’t work. As a matter of fact, my friend Harley Race had it done three times and he’s now in a wheelchair.) I can give you some pain pills.”

He did, but me, not wanting to swap one problem for another, I never took them.

Luckily for me, I have the use of my trusty walker. If I tried to walk, even just across the street without it, I’m on all fours by the time I get there. I’m never without it; it has become really useful for everything I carry, including luggage and grocery bags. Sometimes I give rides to our black dog, Minnie Pearl. She loves it.

My back, thankfully, doesn’t hurt when I’m sitting or lying down. I’m grateful for that.

-6-

As I sat in the waiting room, waiting for the doctor to come back with the news of the operation, I had plenty of time to reflect.

I was thinking that in the short time that we had been together we had gone to the Sun on a road that almost caused me to have a nervous breakdown. The Going to the Sun road was just that. It was a part of the Rocky Mountains that went up above 11,000 feet.

The only problem with it was the car I was in which was leaking oil and had no brakes. How dare Paul take me up there with those conditions! And not only that, but I was in the passenger seat and saw nothing but the thousands of feet of trees, then rocks, below.

When we reached the top, we were in the clouds, and that's when Paul told me, "I hope the brakes hold."

I could have killed him, then and there.

I thought about the time when we camped in a fruit orchard in Florida, where Paul peeled and served me fresh oranges and grapefruits that he had picked fresh from the trees every morning. What a sweetheart he was, and is.

I never looked at him as a big bad wrestler, as I never knew him as such. To me he was always a big ole teddy bear, later to be known as PaPa Bear. He was so soft spoken; never had a bad thing to say. Looked at everyday as a gift and enjoyed it to the fullest.

And he loved me.

I loved that about him, and somewhere in there, I fell in love with him, too.

Then there was the time we went to Twillingate in Newfoundland, in search of an iceberg. Now who does that?

We had just about given up, because the fog was so dense, when all of a sudden, the fog lifted, and there it was. An actual iceberg, just floating in the bay. What a sight!!

We camped in the Codroy valley in Newfoundland, where he brought me flowers and sang our wedding song to me. He had a beautiful voice, a voice that you would never expect from such a man.

He still sings today, but the throat cancer took a lot of it away. He does not sing a lot anymore in public, but he still sings to me.

We went fishing on Briar Island, Nova Scotia, where we cooked our catch in the rocks, and boiled perrywinkles (escargot) over an open pit.

And here I was, sitting in a hospital waiting room, wondering whether we would ever have more of those enchanting times.

The doctor came out and told me the operation had been a success, but he was not out of danger yet. Paul would have to undergo chemotherapy, once a week for two hours, for the next year.

Also he would only be able to eat small meals, liquid and soft foods, and lots of them. So there I was, preparing Paul 6 small meals a day. He had the most positive attitude about everything.

We were living in the old family farm house. Paul was doing a lot of reading and always wondering what we would do next. So one morning, he wakes me up and says, "I got it, we are going to build us a log end home."

He had purchased 57 acres of land from the family and decided that was where we would build our home. We started out by taking morning walks, up and down the property, looking for a perfect spot to build. The fresh air and the walking was doing Paul good, so I went along with it, never ever thinking that we would actually do it.

But we did.

After several days of walking up and down our 57 acres, we finally found a spot we liked on which to build our cedar log end home. I say 'up and down' because our land is on a densely forested mountain.

So, we began. Our only tools were my chainsaw, a pick and shovel, an axe, a hoe and a rake.

The first thing to do was clear our spot. Paul had made up his mind that we were going to build a round house and, as luck would have it, there was a huge maple tree right in the middle of the spot. I cut the maple tree down, and we cleared out the brush, and all that was left was the large maple tree stump.

That stump became Paul's mission. Every day, even on days he had undergone his chemotherapy, he walked up the mountainside and dug around that stump. It was the best thing he could have done.

While he was doing that, I was cutting cedar trees in four foot lengths, peeling the bark off, and stacking them to dry.

By now it was late spring and Paul was in his fourth month of chemo. He had finally gotten that big stump out of there. That feat had given him such satisfaction he felt like a new man. And, with that feeling, came the attitude that he could conquer anything, even his cancer.

And I truly believe that is what saved him.

We knew (from reading it in Rob Roy's "How to…" book), that the cedar had to dry for at least a year, so we decided to build a temporary shelter to spend the winter in. We thought the practice would do us good.

There was plenty of dry wood that had fallen, and lots of standing dead wood. We had found a level smaller spot, just up above our original spot, with no large trees in it, so we cleared and leveled it with our hand tools, and began.

We needed a foundation, so we decided on flat stones. Sounds like a big project, but there was an old logging trail that Paul's father had used to haul logs out by horse that was full of overturned stones.

Instead of going into great detail, I will say that everyday Paul would mix the sand, cement, and lime. I would drag down a couple of logs, and cut them into 2 foot lengths and always have enough for Paul to build with each day.

When the walls were done, I found a bunch of pine trees, all about the same length, that we used for the roof. We covered them with plywood, tar paper, and dirt.

We used pallets for the floor, which we covered with plywood.

It took us 6 months to complete our shelter.

As it turned out the temporary shelter ended up being 40 feet long by 20 feet wide. And, we lived in it for 6 years.

My only dream after I had left home was to eventually go back, build a cabin in the woods, and live happily ever after.

At the age of 44 my dream had come true.

While we were busy with our cabin, my best friend, Carol Bonneau, had a baby boy who she named Casey Edward. By the time we moved into the cabin, he was almost a year old.

We would babysit him during the week, and bring him to the cabin on the weekends. She was a single mom, so we took on the responsibility of helping her raise him.

What a joy that was! Paul would read to him out of the National Geographic, and tell him about all the places he had traveled to, and I

would read him nursery rhymes and children's books.

There were so many fun times with him there, but I need to mention this one. At meal times, I would give him a baby bowl. I had a medium sized bowl and Paul would have a large bowl.

One day, when Casey was around two, I read him the story about the "Three Bears". At the end, he looked at me and said, "That's us!"

From that day on, he was Baby Bear, I was Mama Bear and Paul was Papa Bear. Then, one day, Casey decided that he was not a baby bear anymore and wanted to be called Little Bear. We went from that to Boy Bear, then as a teenager, if I had to, I just called him Bear.

The three bears had lived in the cabin for six years when one day we all noticed that the woodpecker family - Casey had names for all of them - had returned and that was the high point of our day. Little Bear had started school and was well on his way to becoming the Man he is today. He is one of the Few, the Proud, a United States Marine. We are very proud.

Now that Little Bear was in school, Paul and I decided it was time for us to leave the mountain and do something different. He had been cancer-free for five years, and felt that a change would do us both good.

So with the help of our very good friends, Doug and Jane Bengston, we went into the flea market business. We soon realized that you could make a good living anywhere, all over the country. There are flea markets everywhere.

In the summers, we would pick up Little Bear, and travel to such places as Old Orchard Beach, Maine; Myrtle Beach, South Carolina; Minnesota; New York; and Virginia. We also worked the local market in Waterbury, Vermont.

There we met Barb and Ralph Laplant. They admired how we were able to just take off and go anywhere we wanted and work, so one day I told them if they ever wanted to go with us, just let us know.

Be careful what you say to people, because they ended up buying a motor home and following us to Virginia. Ralph has since passed, but we have kept Barb very close to our hearts. She now does the fairs with us and is a very big part of our lives.

In the winter months we went out west to Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and everywhere in between. Paul loved the gypsy life, as it reminded him of the days when he would travel from territory to territory, and believe me I heard all about those days.

We were influenced and inspired into this life by legends in the itinerant peddlers business, namely Marty Harty and his wife Arlene. Marty is now 93, and Arlene 84. They still are on the go and still our mentors. We love them very much.
When we first started attending wrestling conventions years ago, we met two wonderful people, Roy Haynes and his wife Lisa both are great friends and great wrestling fans.

When I could not join Paul at wrestling conventions, they watched over him. Lisa makes sure Paul has the right clothes for every occasion, and Roy stays by Paul's side, awaiting orders, Roy and Lisa's kindness extends beyond the human realm. They have devoted their lives to pet rescue. As much as they have shown compassion for The Butcher, they have shown equal compassion for dogs, mad or otherwise. Please visit their website www.SaveOurStraysVT.org
We were doing a flea market in the popular beach resort city of Old Orchard Beach, Maine when one of the patrons recognized Paul. People were always walking up to Paul and asking him if he was Mad Dog, or the Butcher. That always surprised me, and, after a while, I finally realized there was more to PaPa Bear than I ever knew. He was a well known wrestler and people loved to hate him.

On this day, the man who approached him was the president of the Rutland Vermont State Fair and, as it happened, that summer the fair was

headlining wrestling. He asked Paul what he would charge to make a special appearance on the wrestling card.

Paul said that he no longer wrestled (only with me, once a month).

The guy said he wanted him to be a special referee in the main event.

Paul said he would make him a deal. The deal was for a free vendor's spot at the fair.

The guy said, "How about 25 feet on the main midway of the fair?"

Paul looked at me, and I said, "Say yes, before he changes his mind!" That is how we got into the fair business and became Carneys and, the rest is history.

We would like to acknowledge the Artie Gillette family at this time for helping us along the way. The Gillette family has forever been major players in the fair and carnival business. We became life-long friends with Artie, his wife Christine and their three children, Jane, Libby and Kenny.

Nowadays, when not attending the fairs, like right now, we travel. We are on our way to the Marine Corp Base, Camp Pendleton, in Oceanside California, to spend a couple weeks with Casey (Baby Bear).

He has been in our lives since we first laid eyes on him at birth. He traveled with us and had his own things to sell at the flea markets. When we worked the fairs he would always look for work with the carneys.

One day, at the age of 10, he got a job blowing up balloons in a dart-throwing game. I asked him how hard that was.

He said, "Not hard at all, Mama Bear. I play the tuba, it's easy."

I could go on and on about him, but that would be an entire book in itself. He is the best thing that ever happened to Paul and me. He most definitely is our pride and joy. Thanks for sharing, Carol.

Paul and I are two of the luckiest people I know. Thank God we found each other.....

Chapter 13

A Villain becomes Santa

-1-

May the reader forgive me, for, right now, we are going in a totally different direction in this narrative, if only to please the critics of my writing style, who complain that they never know for sure which way to read- up, down or sideways.

Once again, I officially apologize to these readers, and ask for indulgence.

The truth is that, when remembrances come to mind, I have to write them down right away, for fear of forgetting them.

If I don't, they may be lost again. So that means that, in a few pages, we might be taken in narrative from the early days of French secularists in North America, to the deportation of Acadians, to the singing of the song by half-naked man that made jail convicts cry.

It starts about 10 years ago, when my wife Deana and I were helping our friends Barbara and Ralph set up their wares in the Berlin Mall near Montpelier, Vermont.

They sold sterling and silver jewelry. It also was the first day that Santa Claus was making personal appearances, to meet and talk to small kids at the mall, sitting them down on his knee and asking them what they wanted for Christmas.

He was going to do that every day until Christmas. The fly in the ointment was that this particular Santa showed up drunk (I'm told some people can't do that job unless they are inebriated).

He slurred his speech, slobbered all over babies and six-year-olds alike, and finally slid off the Santa chair to the floor of the Berlin Mall and passed out.

Somebody squealed on him to the manager of the mall, who quickly called security and had drunken Santa taken out on a stretcher.

He then had to put up with dozens of angry parents, and packs of children, all crying, of course, and carrying on like kids do, don't you know.

So Jason, this skinny, quick-thinking mall manager assured the angry parents that Santa wasn't at his best, but his understudy would shortly be there and would replace him.

As he turned to go back to the mall office to look for a replacement, he came face to face with me.

Since we were not yet on a first name basis, he said "Mr. Vachon, you're a lifesaver. How would you like to be Santa Claus this season?"

I said "I don't know if I can do that. I never have. How much does it pay?"

He said "How much do you want?"

I asked Barbara and Ralph, our friends, how much they were paying for the seasonal selling spot in the mall.

So I told skinny Jason I would do it for the rent.

Quickly, he said, "Okay, let's go get you dressed."

I said "I'm not wearing the suit that drunk Santa slobbered all over."

I said "I will start tomorrow, and it will cost you extra. But I will not wear that suit and beard."

That meant he would have to buy another suit.

He said, "What about right now?"

So I told him "If you want someone to wear that stinky Santa suit, you do it."

And, reluctantly, he did.

Now, Jason was a real nice person. (So was his family. We got to know them.) So the reader must be, by now, wondering why I went out of my way

to emphasize that Jason was skinny. It's because I thought it would be important to know that, when I describe what he looked like when he put on that stinky Santa suit and came out of his office.

When we saw this, everybody burst out laughing. Now anybody that puts on a Santa suit can be tall and wide, short and fat, or medium tall or short.

But they cannot be skinny. Skinny doesn't work for good old jolly Santa Claus. Mercifully, good old skinny Jason didn't have to be Santa very long, because most of the people that had been in line with their kids had gone home.

So, after he had spoken to a couple of children, the line dried up and Jason's ordeal was over, and mine had just begun.

I'm joking, because I have enjoyed every moment of it. I am enchanted by all that come back, year after year, to see Santa.

Children of all ages, girls, boys, grown-ups, senior citizens, college students for whom it is a lark, all pay their five dollars to get their picture taken with Santa.

Pet lovers bring the cats or dogs and get a souvenir picture.

I have parents that come in with 8, 9, or 10-year-old kids who tell me that their kids have never seen any other Santa.

Sometimes kids tell me they come to see me especially because their parents tell them the Santa at the Berlin Mall is the real Santa, not a Santa's helper.

My friends Brenda and Bob Sambel, who, for years, ran the number one restaurant in the Vermont state capital, now run a catering service.

They used to do a lot of advertising in the local newspaper, so they arranged with the newspaper editor to have a story written about the professional wrestler that played Santa every year at the Berlin Mall, who had recently written a book called When Wrestling was Real.

They suggested that this might be newsworthy. I suggested to the reporter who came to interview me that he do it in a way that would protect Santa's true identity.

He did one hell of a job. The title of the story was "Santa Remembers When Wrestling was Real".

The pictures featured Santa, the one that remembered, and Butcher Vachon, the one that wrote the book.

It also had a picture of my wife and me at the mall. The story in the paper was such a success that they ran it two years in a row.

So now I have people that bring their kids and grandkids to see Santa, and when the kids are out of earshot, they sidle up to me and whisper in my ear "We know you are Butcher. Good job."

They don’t know how much I enjoy my job, and that I really don’t need the encouragement, but I appreciate it anyway.

-2-

All children have their own story to tell. I listen to them all. I don’t hurry them, and when they leave Santa’s knee, they know they will get something nice for Christmas. They all leave Santa with a smile on their faces, and Santa also has a smile on his face.

The kids themselves, if the truth be known, make it happen. And the result is that, doing that job, I never met a kid I didn’t like.

One of them, however, last December, really pulled my heartstrings. I don’t think I will ever forget what he wanted for Christmas.

This boy came with his parents, who left him to talk to Santa.

They, themselves, were looking at Christmas decorations around where Santa was.

The father looked to be in his early 30’s, and the wife looked to be in her early 20’s.

The boy told me he was seven, and it struck me that, for a seven-year-old, he looked rather pensive and serious.

When I asked him what he wanted for Christmas, he sat there thinking for what seemed like a long time, but was probably only about 10 seconds.

Then he said “All I want for Christmas is for my parents to be back together again.”

When he saw me looking at the people he was there with, he said ‘That’s not my real mother. My real mother lives somewhere else, and I want her to come home again.”

It was the first time, in my ten years of doing Santa, that I was speechless. Not only because I did not know what to tell that kid, but I was afraid that whatever words would come out of my mouth would be accompanied by tears coming out of my eyes.

It seemed like an eternity passed before I found my voice again.

I said “Look, son, I don’t know that Santa can do anything for your situation, except that there will be other times in your life where you’re the only one that will have to decide what to do. It is like that.”

He just looked at me and, I think, shrugged his shoulders, and followed his would-be parents, who were already walking away down the mall.

That was one experience that Santa had that was sad, but most were happy.

-3-

Another experience that Santa had was a lot happier than the last one.

A young lady in her early 20s, carrying a baby in her arms, said to me, “Do you remember that, last year, you asked me what I wanted for Christmas, and I told you I wanted a baby, and you told me that I was asking the wrong guy.

“Well, I asked my husband and sure enough, here we are, all three of us,” pointing at her husband and holding the baby in her arms.

Then turning around to look directly at me, she winked, and said “Thank you, Santa, and Merry Christmas to you.”

-4-

Across the street from the Berlin Mall where Santa does his meeting and greeting and Ho-Ho-ing is a hospital. The Sunday of one Thanksgiving

weekend, a young lady came at noontime, when Santa's appearances start, and asked "Until what time would you be here today?"

I said "We are here every day, from noon until 6 PM, except for the first two weeks, when we are not here at all on Monday or Tuesday."

She said "We know that, but my girlfriend just had her baby 48 hours ago.

"We live 50 to 60 miles from here and don't have our own transportation and we don't know when we can bring the baby back to get her picture taken with Santa."

Sure enough, they came back, that girl, her friend, the new mother, and her brand-new baby.

They were so afraid that she wouldn't get her picture taken with Santa, but, sure enough, she had her picture, taken for the first time in her life, in Santa's arms.

That one still pulls at Santa's heartstrings. I don't see how Santa can ever get his picture taken with anybody younger than that one. One for the record book.

Now, at the other extreme, about a year later, Santa met a very nice lady, who said she was 90 years young. She was all by herself, sprightly and joyous. She told me she was getting her picture taken with Santa so that she could send it to her to children in California.

When we gave her pictures, it dawned on me that if she was 90, how old must her kids be?

So I asked her.

She said "My son is 70 years old and my daughter is 68", which just goes to prove that if your heart's in the right place, you're never too young or too old for Santa.

I saw that nice old lady again, walking through the mall about 10 days later, and asked her what her children's reaction to the pictures had been.

She said “They love them, and said to say ‘hello’ to you, Santa.”

-6-

Then there is the story of Christian and his brother Justin. They are special people, as are their parents. My first contact with them was through Santa, four or five years ago.

The boys were teenagers then. Christian, I think, was the oldest, but he was the one with special medical needs. His father, John, at one time told me specifically what his illness was, but I’ve forgotten it. Whatever it’s called, it makes them scared of contact with anybody that’s not an immediate family member.

That makes Christian especially scared of white-haired, bearded, old men wearing red clown suits; namely me, passing myself off as Santa.

So, the first time I met them, I said to myself “I can get anybody to sit on my knee. After all, I’m the best Santa there is.”

As it turned out, it was more of a challenge than I thought it was going to be, and I would not have got it done without the help of my future friend and co-conspirator, his brother Justin.

Christian seemed to like Santa Claus, but he was too scared to sit on his knee.

So Justin told me “Let’s try this.” He sat on my knee, and told his brother Christian, who is not afraid of him, to sit on his knee. As he did, Justin slipped off my knee, and his brother Christian wound up on Santa’s knee. That’s how the first picture of Christian sitting on Santa’s knee was taken.

I remember very well Christian good-naturedly shaking his fist at his brother, Justin.

Since then, Santa has become a bit more familiar with Christian, and vice versa. But he is still kind of leery of sitting on Santa’s knee.

He still asks me every year if I can play hockey, which is one of his catch phrases that he keeps repeating.

One time, I had either sold or just given one of my books to Justin, and asked him to let me know what he thought of it.

Sure enough, he did.

Here's what his letter said*: Dear Paul,*

I really enjoyed reading your book <u>When Wrestling was Real</u>, it showed me that there's a lot more to a person than meets the eye.

You are a very admirable person for everything that you do and have done.

What made you want to be a seasonal Santa Claus at the Berlin Mall?

I would love to see half of you in a Santa suit and half in your wrestling gear, like one of those before and after photos.

My brother really enjoys seeing you as Santa. I on the other hand, would have loved to see you as a wrestler. You mean the world to him and me as well. Thank you for your patience with him.

While reading your book, I found many things to be very interesting. I love how you took on not only the image of a Russian, but also the name (Nikolai Zolatoff), but also that name, at the time Sputnik (the very first Earth satellite) was launched, in order to build up your fan base.

Where did the nickname "The Butcher" come from?

You got to travel a lot. Is that something you enjoyed? Your stories were very descriptive and easy to visualize.

I would have to say that my favorite part of your book was the story that you told regarding Mabel parties. What a great prank, although I would not like to be on the receiving end.

The way that you wrote about your opponents was as if you were a family, and really shows caring for one another. Was it like that in the ring, too?

You also wrote a lot about your family, so I can tell you are a family man.

I was sorry to hear about your sister, Vivian, who was also a wrestler, like your daughter Luna. It took me a while to trace all of the Vachon wrestlers, but I found them.

I am very much looking forward to reading your other two books. Thanks again for the Christmas present.

Happy New Year.

Sincerely,

Justin Sell

-8-

My response to Justin Sell on his book report:

First of all, Justin, thanks for your communication and glowing report on book 1, <u>When Wrestling was Real</u>.

You are right about there being more to a person than meets the eye, for that is exactly what I thought about you the first time I saw you interact with your brother, Christian.

You make his life so much more enjoyable, because of your love for him. It was so evident to <u>me</u> the first time Santa met you guys and you quickly slipped away, leaving him there by himself to get his picture taken.

When he realized that happened, he shook his finger at you.

I laughed to myself, thinking of all the good times I had growing up with my seven brothers and five sisters.

Justin, I want to do a much more extensive review to you about the book report, but today I'm leaving on a two-month trip by land and sea that will take me to Hawaii, but I am taking this manuscript with me, and hopefully will finish it on my trip. If you're wondering "What the heck?", I'm talking about your goals.

I am currently writing a fourth book, (tentatively titled <u>Life after Professional Wrestling</u>) and, if it's okay with you, am including the book report you sent me.

Once again, thank you for your book report. See you at ho-ho times.

Sincerely yours, in friendship,

Paul "Butcher" Vachon

a.k.a. Santa Claus These folks are just a few of the friends that I've made being Santa/the professional wrestler. I am seeing the world from a different point of view and I now understand what Will Rogers meant when he said, "I never met a man I didn't like."

Chapter 14

A few final words from Paul and Dee -1-

I have so much to be grateful for.

So many people have contributed to the making of this book.

Any book written about pro wrestling, by me or anybody else, benefits from the input and contributions of wrestling historians, some of whom have made it their lifetime’s work.

Greg Oliver, from Toronto, of SLAM! Wrestling benevolently gave his valuable time and skill to editing my trilogy of books, "When Wrestling was Real."

I also would like everybody that reads this book to know what great help we got from Dr. Mike Lano from California, who for years has been a source of help and knowledge to me and other wrestlers. He also hosts a great radio show on which I have been a guest a couple of times.

I also want to acknowledge my good friend Patric Laprade of Montreal, who did a lot of work on the publishing of my first three books.

I must not forget my long-time friend and collaborator (and I mean real long time-53 years to be exact) Bob Leonard from Regina, Saskatchewan. We were both punks when we met. He was a punk sportswriter for the Regina newspaper, and I was just a French Canadian lumberjack with a would be Mad Dog for a partner, tearing up the prairie provinces for Stu Hart of Calgary Stampede Wrestling.

Bob Leonard is now a writer for the Cauliflower Alley Club, a bunch of us old wrestlers (and new) that get together once a year at the Gold Coast Casino and Hotel in Las Vegas to exchange lies about how great we were. Thanks for the friendship.

Being amateurs at book writing, editing and publishing, my wife Dee and I were blessed with the guidance and advice of two very special people, Dana

Dunnan and his wife Judy. They made themselves available to us, day or night, and without their hard work, this book would never have come into being. To them, we say,”Thank you, from the bottoms of our hearts.” We already rate this book a success because of the co-operation of these two great friends.

I had been thinking that, maybe, at 74 years of age, this book would be my last. But now because of the influence of my wife and our friends, and their willingness to help, I'm thinking that between all of us we still have plenty to write about. With each passing day, new memories are made.

Here’s hoping that the golden years are full of beautiful memories.

A large number of people read the book and provided suggestions that guided the book to its final form. All shortcomings that remain are mine.

My thanks to Ed “Zeke” Zubrow of Rye, New Hampshire; Steve Frazier of Lee, New Hampshire; and Carl and Roxanne Corrow, of nearby Walden, Vermont.

A special note of thanks to Alex Smith of St. Paul, Minnesota. Alex is at Ball State University in Indiana. Alex provided insight far beyond his years.

-As this book comes to an end, I can't help but remember all the beautiful folks that I have been lucky to come in contact with, whether it was at the local field days, the county fairs, wrestling conventions, sitting by the pool, or at the mall at Christmas time.

Perhaps it was whom I was married to that brought me closer to these people, but I would like to say that, wrestling fans or not, you all have touched my heart.

It’s a pleasure to have you stop by and just say hello. I know that it always makes Paul’s day when someone stops by and says, “I was just a kid when I saw you wrestle.” Then they mention how their grandmothers would go crazy over it.

Paul is grateful to all of you for even remembering him. He now knows that his life was a success. It’s the small things in life that make all the

difference. We Love <u>ALL</u> of you.

The important things in life are simple things, like smiles, friends, sunsets and sunrises, children, old folks, laughter, and family. The more I write about the people I have known, the more I would like to go back and see those people again.

One should not overreach one's dreams, because God and I know that my cup already runneth over with the good life and happiness. I'm really thankful to be able to still remember those people, and good times, 40 and 50 years after the fact.

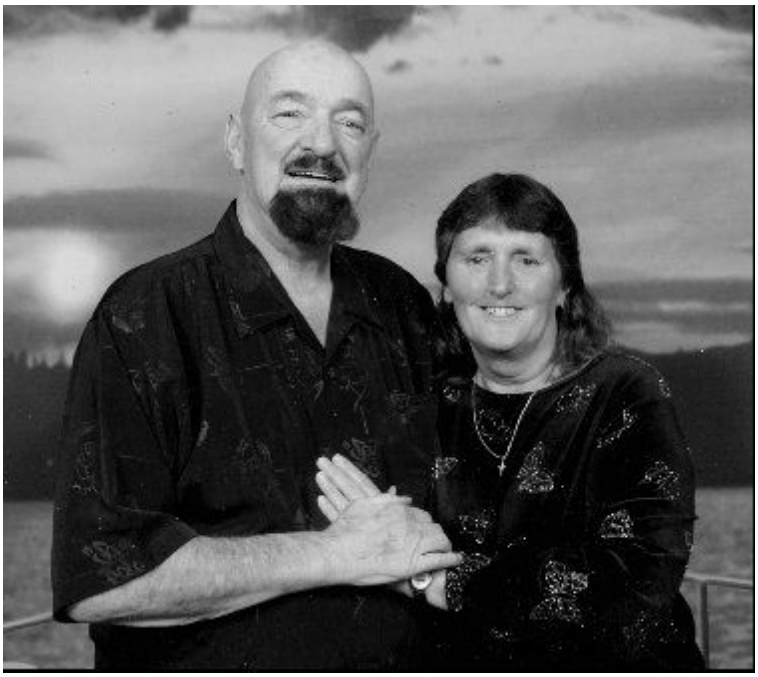
Bad times surely existed, but mostly I tend to have forgotten them.

I can't think of a worse fate for anyone than to get to their sunset years and wish they had done this or that, and say, "If only I had," or "Why didn't I do this, why didn't I travel, climb that mountain, cross that ocean?"

That's easy for me to say, because I really did all the things that I wanted to, and more.

I have no way of knowing how many steps lie ahead of me. I know that Deana will walk alongside me.

It will be a wonderful journey.



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Terry Funk Sr. photo courtesy Darla Staggs

Wrestling territories map courtesy of Kyle Kusch, The Basement Geographer, www.basementgeographer.blogspot.com

George Gordienko photo courtesy Ted Gordienko

Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson courtesy of his mother, Ata Photos by Dr. Mike Lano are from his collection Mike Lano has been a wrestling reporter, columnist and photographer, shooting wrestling worldwide since 1966. He began shooting for the Los Angeles territory program, which quickly led to him working for the U.S., European and Japanese newstand magazines.

In 1979, he began working as Roy Shire's only promotion photographer in San Francisco (where Mike had flown up to shoot the annual battle royals and other top cards) while treating area wrestlers Ray Stevens, Pepper Gomez, and Woody Farmer at the dental school he was attending.

He's continuously hosted and cohosted wrestling radio shows on terrestrial and satellite radio since 1973 (his latest show is called *Legends Radio* and Paul and Maurice have been on several times) and his images have appeared in most books on wrestling, as well as on network television and cable channel news programs in the U.S. and Canada.

He's been Cauliflower Alley Club's official photographer for years and has covered most reunions and fanfests, starting with the WFIA, which he was on the board of directors of.

He was also pals with Luna Vachon since she broke in with Moolah, and who always asked to look over Mike's photos of Aunt Vivian, who Mike still regards as one of the top female athletes ever.

Dr Mike still loves the biz, but misses the territories every day.

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Suggested Reading

Pat Laprade and Bertrand Hébert: Mad Dogs, Midgets & Screwjobs: The Untold Story of How Montreal Shaped the World of Wrestling Greg Oliver:
SLAM! Wrestling: Shocking Stories from the Squared Circle
The Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame: The Heels
The Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame: The Tag Teams
The Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame: The Canadians
Benoit: Wrestling with the Horror That Destroyed a Family and Crippled a Sport
The Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame: Heroes & Icons (coming in 2013)

Index

AWA,131,136,138,140,176
Acadia,116
Acadians,117,267
Afflis, Dick (See Bruiser, Dick the)
Alligator wrestling,170,171
André the Giant (André Roussimoff),182,190,
187(picture),191(poster),196-199
Atlanta,42,97-99,131,132
Australia,117,241

Banff National Park,216
Bastien,Red,139-145
Bearman,The(Dave McKigney),168,169(picture)
Beaudoin,Dr.,244-248
Beliveau,Jean,193,194
Bengston,Doug and Jane,262
Berlin Mall,267,268
Birmingham,AL,100
Boesch,Paul,174
Bombay,88-91,241
Bonneau,Casey,261,262(picture),266
Bonneau,Carol,210,261,266
Bouchard,Dr.,249
Brealeux,Jean-Paul,15,49
Britton,Jack,110,158,159
Brixton,GB,155
Bruiser,Dick the,126,127(poster),128-130,132(poster),133,135,184-186,196
Bunyan,Paul (Max Palmer),160-162

CKVL,179,180
CTV,180
Cajuns,117
Campbell,Al,146
Canadian Championship,14,107

Carlson,Cowboy,58
Carpentier,Edouard,175
Carroll,Earl,15,16,21
Cauliflower Alley Club,153,284
Champ des Foux,27
Champlain,Samuel de,116
Chicago,16,17,20,21,36,126,190,193
Comiskey Park,133,137
Commonwealth Games,35
Corrow, Carl and Roxanne,285
Cortez,Hercules,139-145
Cowansville,QUE,114
Cowley,Chief Jim,15,32-35
Crockett,Jim,52,75
Crosby,Bing,115
Crusher,The132(poster),133(poster),134(picture),135,137(picture)
Delaporte,Roger,152
Dempsey,Joe,107
Denver,36,37
Des Moines,36,44
Detroit,110-112
Dion,Celine,85
Dixon,Dory,61,62(picture)
Duluth,181

Edinburgh,Duke of,114
Edmonton,207
Ellington,Duke,64,69,71(picture),72

Fabulous Moolah,The,233,234(picture),235(picture) Ferré,Jean,see André the Giant
Foley,Mick,147,150
Frazier,Steve,285
Fundy,Bay of,117
Funk,Dory Jr.,106,107
Funk,Dory Sr.,105(picture),106,107,147,152,175

Fuzzy Cupid,159

Gagne,Verne,120(picture),132,174,176,177,178,179
Gagnon,Michael,140-145
Geigel,Bob,127
Gilbert,Doug(The Pro),187-189
Gillette,Artie,265
Glacier National Park,217
Glen Sutton,QUE,10,49
“Goldfinger”,75
Gordienko,George,147,152,153,154(picture)
Gordienko,Ted,147,153
Goulet,René,147,150
Grand Prix Wrestling,102,156,176,181-206
Gunkel,Ray,132

Hangman,The,121,123(picture)
Hart,Stu,164
Harty,Arlene and Marty,263
Haynes,Lisa and Roy,264
Hennig,Larry,190,196,197
Highway 105,6-13,55,58-60,114,209
Hodge,Danny,147,150
Hogan,Hulk,190
Hornblower,Bob,21
Houston,60

Illinois Athletic Commision,136
Irish Jacky,159

Japan,137,204
Jasper National Park,216
Jette,Euclid,26
Johnson,Ata,156

Johnson,Dwayne “The Rock”,157(picture)
Johnson,Jack,32
Johnson,Rocky,156
Jonathan,Don Leo (The Morman Giant),196,199-202

Kansas City,37,97,99-101,125,126,128,129,131
Karbo,Wally,141
Karachi,Pakistan,64,66,69
Kazabosky,Larry,104,107,174
Keitser,Norman,119,146
Kennedy,Kangaroo.68
Kenyon,J.Michael,108,147,149
Kerouac,Jack,222
King Kong (Emil Czaja),63,64(picture),65,67,78,80,89-93
Kohler,Fred,175
Kowalski,Walter(Killer),59,120,121(picture),158,208

Lake Memphremagog,224
Langevin,Bob,190
Lanza,Mario.115
LaPlante,Barb and Ralph,263
LaPrade,Patric,283
LeGault,Gerry,175
Leonard,Bob,284
Letterman,David,184
Light,Harry,159,240
Little Louie,159
Little Tokyo,159
London,114
London Olympic Games 1948,34,35
Lord Littlebrook,159

Mad Russian,The,159
Maivia,Lea,156

Maivia,Peter,152-157
Mansonville,QUE,206,210
Marciano,Rocky,163,164(picture)
Marion,Bob(Pat O'Brien),106
Martin,Judy,234
Martin,Frenchy,116
Marelli,Tony,107,109
McIntyre,Velvet,234
McMahon,Vince Jr.,59,239,241(picture),242(picture),243
McMahon,Vince Sr.,174,206,207,239,241
McNabb,Bob,15
Melby,Jim,146
Midget wrestling,158,159,160(picture)
Milwaukee,36,140
Minneapolis-St.Paul,16,17,36,131,145,179,193
Monsoon,Gorilla,165
Montreal,QUE,5,8,12,15,20,25,26,40,44,46,82,113,140,179,180, 191-193,251
Montreal Athletic Commission,177
Moore,Archie,163
Mount Rushmore,223
Muchinick,Sam,175
Muhammad Ali,163,165(picture)
Mulroney,Brian,46

Napolitano,George,146
National Wrestling Alliance,51,57
Nevada, Lance,146
New Brunswick,116
Newfoundland,256
New Guinea,117
Newport,VT,12-13
New Zealand,117,121.122,156
North Bay,Ontario,104,105,109,152
Nova Scotia,116,156,257

Odd Job,75
Oliver,Greg,232,283
Omaha,36
Orleans County Fair,250

Padre Island,207Paris,Butcher of,125
Park Beach Hotel,67
Parks,Reggie,138
Penfield,Wilder,86
Picard,JeanPaul,192
Pig,Paul the,125,126
Pigeons,28-30
Prince Nichol,159
Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame,158
Provincial Amateur Wrestling Championships,14

Quebec,Battle of,116
Quebec City,42,180,191
Quinn,Eddie,175

Race,Harley,196,254
Radium Hot Springs,217
Regina,Saskatchewan,14-16,19,165
Richard,Maurice Arena,179
Richford,VT,55,56,58
Robi,Alys,82(picture),83(picture),84,85(picture),86(picture),87
Rollin,Ti-Jean,26,27
Rougeau,Johnny,177,190,194
Royal Albert Hall,114,128
Ruby,Bert,110,111,159,240
“Rustom-E-Rome”,73,74(poster)

Sambel,Brenda and Bob,271
Sammartino,Bruno,172(picture),173,177

Samoa,156
Sanmaur,QUE,11
Santa Claus,40,41,267-282
Sarpoliis,Doc,104
Saxon,Frank,15,33
Sell,Christian,277-279
Sell,Justin,277-282
Sherbrooke,QUE,180,191
Singh,Dara,63,72-74,94,241
Sky Low Low,159
Smith,Alex,285
Sputnik,111
St. Albans,VT,60
St. Lawrence,Gulf of,117
St. Louis,112
Steele, George “The Animal”,242
Steroids,239,240
Sydney,Australia,63,88,95,128

Thesz,Lou,147
Tiny Row,159
Togo,Tosh,75,76
Tom Thumb,159
Tragos,George,147
Truesdale,Tuffy,170(picture),171
Tuesday Night Titans,242
Tunney,Frank,175
Tyson,Mike,28

Un Canadien Errant,116

Vachon,André,90
Vachon,Dee,6,22-24,148,149,210-224,225(picture),226,227(picture),255-267
Vachon,Donna(Black),87,88(picture),89-102
Vachon,Ferdinand,6,8,25,30-34,49,55

Vachon,Gertrude(Luna),150,183,228,229(picture),230,231(picture),232,233(picture),234-236,237(picture),238-242,243(picture)
Vachon,Marguerite,6,8,27,28,208,212
Vachon,Maurice(Mad Dog),14,21,26-35,36(picture),37(picture),42,43(picture),44,45,46,47(picture),48,106,108,109,114,124,125,132(poster),134-137,138(picture),139,140,142(picture),143,164-168,175,176,252
Vachon,Reggie,192
Vachon,Van,101,102,183,206
Vachon,Vivian,39,210,212,235,236(picture),238(picture) Valois,Frank,182
Van Fleet,Don,49,51,53-58
Vellano,Tony,158
Von Hecksey,Baron,63

Walcott Jersey Joe,163,164(picture),165-168
Wigan,GB,15,34
Winnipeg,16-20,145
Wrestling territories,51,52(map)

Yellowstone National Park,221,223
YMCA, Montreal,15,16,32,35

Zubrow,Ed”Zeke”,285
Zulotoff,Nicolai (also Nicoli Zolatoff and Nikita Zolatoff),161,240

A Wrestling Historian’s Review

Revealed, at last, in Wrestling With the Past: Life In and Out of the Ring, is this semi-startling fact: The enduring romance of Joseph Ferdinand Paul (The Butcher) Vachon and Deana Marie (Dee) Goddard began, of all places, in a dented-can store at North Troy, Vermont.

The fourth of The Butcher's captivating personal memoirs is, for my money, the best of the bunch – and I was a large fan of the first three.

In this latest volume, the reader not only collects a crash course concerning the 35-year career of Paul -- but learns, in wonderful detail, how meeting

his "true love" has led to him being (correct me if I'm wrong) The Last of the Great Barmstorming Wrestlers of the 20th & 21st Centuries!!

You see, after Vachon, then in his 50s, wisely pulled the plug on a grueling, globe-girdling pro mat journey, his beloved little sister, the late wrestling glamour girl, Vivian Vachon, had the good sense to point Paul toward the dented-can store on the other side of the U.S.-Canadian border from their family farm in southern Quebec.

Pretending that he was in dire need of canned tomatoes, Monsieur Vachon came calling on Deana and -- before he could say "My older brother, Mad Dog, is a famous wrestler, too" – he was loaded up with a literal carload of not only tomatoes but tomato puree, for a chaser.

And it wasn't long after that he and Dee, whose life story is every bit as extraordinary as Paul's, were just about the hottest item alive in Vermont's Orleans County, the largest of three counties comprising the state's fabled Northeast Kingdom.

Also, in this 309-page volume, Paul addresses – for the first time on a public stage – the tearful subject of his late daughter Luna Vachon's untimely demise. If anyone ever needed proof that our lives are filled with highs and lows, Wrestling With the Past also recounts the horrendous accidents which befell brother Maurice (aka Mad Dog) and cost the life of little sister Vivian and her 10-year-old daughter, Julie.

Still, the upbeat nature of the indomitable Vachons comes through with full force, not only with Paul's recounting of each link in a long chain of amazing mat adventures, but equally so with Dee's captivating recitals of her own remarkable life, the couple's dear friendships, and how it almost seems logical that, for large portions of each year nowadays, they are world-class "itinerant peddlers."

This latter fact, then, goes toward how Vachon, three-quarters of a century along in a fantastic life which shows few signs of slowing down, can rate as the "last" of that great breed of highway-gulping, long haul-driving wrestling barnstormers so prevalent across the half-century from the 1930s to the 1980s.

"On the Road Again" isn't just a song to this smiling pair; it's a bonafide lifestyle.

Anyone who has seen Paul and Dee, for most of two decades, at coast-to-coast wrestling reunions and Hall of Fame induction ceremonies and who wonders where all that driving has led needs to read "Wrestling With the Past." It's a story unto itself and I, for one, can't wait for a fifth book to land on the Vachon family bookshelf and tell us even more about the dynamic duo that remains steadfastly loyal to the Quebec-Vermont border country in which both were raised.

In short, there are a lot of books about pro wrestling to choose from. But there are few anywhere near as eclectic and absorbing as this one.

J Michael Kenyon is the Dean of wrestling historians and a fellow inductee in Waterloo Iowa Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame and Museum.

A Reader Tells How the Book Renews her Past Have you ever felt compelled to visit a place you've read about?

I was weaned on National Geographic, in my grandparent's home, in the Eastern Townships village of Bromptonville, Quebec. An unadorned home with industrial carpets on the floors and the constant aromas of roasting lamb or chicken, a television that was only turned on for the evening news or the weekly wrestling show, a radio, again for the news at five in the morning, three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs and an acre of vegetable and strawberry garden that didn't have one weed.

I was the only modi-anglais child around but the French children and I were great friends. The huge families were amazing to me. My mom was hospitalized half of most years, my brother stayed with my city grandparents, and I was shipped off to the townships. How lonely might I have been if not for two wonderful relatives and all the enormous families that probably didn't even notice I wasn't one of their own during family gatherings in various houses around that area?

It was my world and, until moving to Vermont in the mid-1980's, I'd spent a lot of time searching for a place that would give my children the same sort of feeling I gleaned in the simple home of my maternal grandparents. Ahh, but the colorful books to spark a young girl's imagination were stealthily encouraged by a woman who wanted me to see more, do more, go everywhere 'before you get married...IF you get married." Grandma, the original open—minded feminist, would watch me as I flipped the pages and say, "Perhaps you'll go there someday." I did go to many of the countries depicted in that august magazine, but it wasn't because I was driven to do so. Curious, yes, but never did I jump on a plane because an irresistible magnetic force pulled me in any particular direction.

Traveling the world in the 1970's was easy. If I had more than two days off in a row, I was in Europe, or the Caribbean, or points on the map that weren't touted as good choices. I just wanted to see whatever I could, and write Grandma a letter from each place to tell her all about the people, points of interest or adventures I chanced upon along the way.

Then I read the last of Paul "The Butcher" Vachon's books. I'd enjoyed all three of his WHEN WRESTLING WAS REAL tomes. They made me laugh out loud, cry a bit, think a lot and remember a living room with my Grandfather in his LazyBoy, Grandma in the kitchen and National Geographics stacked high, along with Field and Stream and True Detective magazines.

Grandpa worked all the time. The garden in the summer. Winters you'd find him in the basement making knives or mathematical puzzles out of steel we'd gathered at the dump on summer evenings. He'd also spend time in the kitchen, cleaning his rifles. I can still smell the oil and see the felt. But, all activity would stop when wrestling came on TV.

Grandpa, would get into his chair, make sure his hearing aid and glasses were just so, pull the lever that raised his feet and we'd wait for the fights to start. Grandpa would laugh out loud and smile non-stop throughout the show.

"Look at that son of a bitch!" "Well, that dirty bastard!" "What a Christly move THAT was."

Grandma would call in from the kitchen, "OH, Cliff, must you swear so?"

Silence.

A laugh, then the inevitable, “Did you see that son of a bastard bitch go behind the referee and give that Christly piece of shit a thump? Jesusss Christ!”

From the kitchen, “OH, Cliff. Please...” He wouldn't quit swearing and Grandma was just letting me know that it wasn't proper. I had a blast with Grandpa on those days. A real BLAST. At eight, nine, ten, eleven...who would want to live anywhere else?

And, at nearly sixty, I'll tell you, I feel like I'm back there whenever I read one of Paul Vachon's books.

The last one, Wrestling with the Past; Life In and Out of the Ring, pulled me into my past and took me home again.

Almost. It actually took me to the author's early dwelling. You see, Monsieur Vachon was raised in Glen Sutton on route 105A in the Eastern Townships of Quebec. For the past twenty-five years, I've lived on route 105 in East Berkshire, Vermont.

With twelve children, the senior Vachons left Montreal to give them a dairy farm upbringing. I became a herdsman on a Vermont dairy farm when Holly and David were just my wee tots for the same reason. Reading about the family, apart from wrestling, took me back to my wonder years among the Quebecois of Bromptonville.

There are parts of the book that moved me emotionally, to the point of NEEDING to touch something of my own childhood, and the closest thing I could get to it was just across the border from our home.

A man, raised in hard work, hard times and with all the loves and losses possible in a lifetime in the ring, on the air, on television, in and out of love, children born and children lost, siblings loved and lost or injured but always within memory’s tender reach.

A man who could body slam a giant, turn a dream into a million dollar venture within a year, display passion, hurt feelings, and then find tenderness and optimism enough to pick fresh oranges and grapefruits to peel for his ladylove, Dee...well, this serendipitous life touched a nerve within my being.

Perhaps, like no other. I wanted my Grandparents back. I wanted all my little French friends and their laughing fathers and ever-loving mothers. I wanted to go back in time when I read this collaborative literary effort of Paul and Dee Vachon.

Why? Because they 'get it'. They 'get' what life's about and I think I do, too, but I wanted so badly to have it not just as a memory but as something tangible and concrete.

So, with a twenty-nine day old new hip, I jumped on my bicycle and headed up 105 to Richford. Crossed the border at Glen Sutton and asked the guard if he knew where the Vachon farm could be.

“You mean the wrestler's place?”

“Yes, I do. Paul Vachon wrote another book, and I've got to see where he spent years of his life.”

“Well, it's sort of falling down.....but it's on your left about five miles up the road. There's a big porch falling down.” I pedaled up 105A to the Potton County line and looked to my left. There it was.

I laid my bike in the tall clover on the steep driveway. The big old house was, indeed, falling down. Yet, I didn't see or feel that at all. I felt that it was just tired from having had so many lives come and go from its doors. The windows upstairs were smashed out. There was a lot of debris here and there on the collapsing veranda.

“Ahh, you need to rest, don't you?” I asked that old place. “Well, you've launched a lot of lives from your rooms, so you just mellow out now. You deserve it.”

I told the house about Paul and Dee's love and that one of my favorite lines from his book was, “My parents were practicing Catholics. They practiced a lot.”

Large families were expected from the time of Jean Talon until about a generation ago. I was the beneficiary of large-families-by-association and that's what I felt as I stood before the Vachon homestead. Embraced. Ethereally, but I could hear the laughter, the singing, the prayers.

As I stood there, facing the house, I was back in Bromptonville for the first time in decades. Totally back.

I turned around to face the road but there was something else to see. In her most calm way, The Madonna, feet buried in the cement brick that supported her, was facing the house just as I'd been.

How long had she stood there? Palms facing outward in acceptance, a face with eyes lowered in servitude, a grace all around her and emanating through me to a home she'd guarded for how long? Maybe since the 1940's when the Vachons moved in? Maybe later. No matter when she came, she decided to stay. I think, the memories she made as a quiet observer keep her there. I know, without a doubt that, as I stood between The Blessed Virgin and the Vachon home, the sights and sounds of all the joys that ever were in that once-occupied to the rafters farmhouse, came into my mind.

Without question, that's the closest I've ever been to being 'home' again in all my born days. That was last week.

Today, I went back again. Long bike ride. A good 35 miles there and back. Yet, to go back in time, I'd pedal a thousand miles.

So, I guess, having read all the travel magazines over the years, I think I've discovered the one that really captured all my needs. I don't need to WRESTLE WITH THE PAST...I just go there.

Heather McKeown is, among other things, a flight attendant for JetBlue. Her book on her life as a flight attendant **Above and Beyond: Inspiring Adventures into the Blue** *is available on Amazon***.** *She publishes a printed newspaper called The Optimist to which I subscribe. She also broadcasts a public affairs television program on St. Albans' community television, on which I have been a guest.*